



## **Skills Policy and Equity: A Matter of Human Rights**

A grounded theory of equity in policy  
for vocational education and training (VET)

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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The study was conducted with approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network approval number H13791, dated 27 May 2014. The standard of the application was categorised as requiring a level of risk analysis based on harm, discomfort and inconvenience to participants in the study deemed as vulnerable within the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council [AHMRC], Australian Research Council, & Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2013).

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# Abstract

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## Background

Equity in education is defined internationally and in Australia as fairness and inclusion, and these concepts are intrinsic to human rights. Vocational education and training (VET), or technical vocational education and training (TVET) which is the term used by UNESCO (2016), has a nexus with equity in skills policy since in Australia VET is the source of training for skills which learners experiencing disadvantage are most likely to approach to improve their job prospects. Skills can provide access to improved income, health, well-being and social inclusion. There are community benefits also when the skills base is increased. In Australia and internationally, practitioners, policy analysts and researchers argue that equity is compromised by policy that focuses on industry needs and defines learners in terms of units of capital input. There is frequent reference in the literature and in policy to the need to embed equity into skills policy.

## Aims

The aims of the study are to improve understanding of: how to more effectively represent adult learners experiencing disadvantage for the purposes of interpretation in skills policy; and how to incorporate equity as human rights into skills policy. The evolved research questions are: how is equity defined and implemented in skills policy; how might learner disposition inform equity objectives in skills policy; and what should be the key features of governance of equity in skills policy?

The intellectual puzzle is: how might equity be embedded into skills policy? This study uses the intellectual puzzle as a framework to research questions to enhance flexibility in the research, to acknowledge that questions may have no answers and to emphasise aspects of relationships in the research.

## Methodology and Methods

The puzzle demanded methodology that would envision or imagine forward. Constructivist grounded theory was an obvious choice through which to understand basic social and organisational problems and processes involving diverse categories of actors in the equity, policy and learning

framework. The topic is explored through induction of empirical evidence, interviews, observation and comparison with extant literature. The provenance of the research is equity programs in VET that are delivered through government-provided contested funding in Tasmania by public, private and community registered training organisations (RTOs). Interviews were conducted with adult learners socially categorised in policy as experiencing disadvantage, together with government and institutional policy-makers, teachers and trainers. Constructivist grounded theory provides a new approach to this social justice topic where the prevailing analysis is quantitative.

## **Findings**

Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, findings are represented in substantive grounded theory and potential formal theory. The delimited substantive grounded theory emerged from empirical evidence and delivered “problematic equity”. This is a slice of theory located in a time and circumstances and explores the complexities and conflicts of equity in skills policy. The theory makes learners visible as a process of learner disposition and locates them within policy and organisational frameworks. The potential formal theory is abstracted from the substantive grounded theory, is generic and has prospects for broader application across substantive areas of study. The potential formal theory is “alternative equity”. “Alternative equity” proposes that there are at least two concepts of equity: neo-equity (a term which emerges from the research) and embedded equity. Neo-equity is primarily a product of the new public management paradigm with the dominant goal of productivity for industry goals and the learner as a unit of human capital input. In neo-equity, most policy-makers do not make the connection between equity and human rights. Embedded equity is represented within a paradigm of new public governance with equity as a matter of human rights taking a dominant position. “Embedded equity” draws attention to the role of methodology in policy analysis, distinguishing between contemporary quantitative methodology and opportunity arising from constructivist grounded theory.

## **Conclusions**

This study locates VET in a human rights “recession” in Australia. The study approaches the policy table to argue that reform in the VET sector must also be reform in equity policy. Equity is a matter of human rights but most policy-makers and academic commentators do not see the connection. This study argues that the contemporary Australian position is neo-equity; it eschews human rights law and is not equity at all. Nonetheless, human rights law does not have all the answers to address the equity gap. Equity in skills policy should be governed and embedded in a compatible, new public

governance approach to public administration that is grounded in public values. Public administrators and universities must come together to diagnose issues of de-centred network governance; and make visible the transitioning public administration paradigms of new public management and new public governance. Most of all, if meaningful change is to occur, policy analysis should be transformed and new methodologies applied. This study makes visible problematic equity where social justice is re-articulated because of productivity objectives in which the industry demand is dominant. “Embedded equity” is proposed to improved understanding of equity as human rights law and what is needed to govern it. Analysis of learner disposition and constructivist grounded theory are exemplified as ways of building new understanding in policy. This matter requires that academic research come to the government policy table to clarify the nexus between VET and equity.



# Foreword

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## The Researcher

I am a white Anglo-Saxon female in my sixties. My early working class origins help me to value the opportunities for education and fulfilling employment that have been part of my adult life. My personal and professional interests come together in commitment to critical inquiry and matters of social justice for people who experience disadvantage. Across Australian and state governments and the not for profit sector, and in universities, I have worked in areas directly or indirectly related to attempting to break down barriers to exclusion, especially through education. I am trained in the law and have used my degree in interdisciplinary policy areas. I am a people person with deep interest in social justice issues and a fundamental belief that contemporary social problems demand interdisciplinary responses.

I now work in an area where I conduct interviews with mental health patients, including forensic patients, clinicians and public servants. The role is to oversight human rights. I have seen many times the transformative effects of education among people who are extremely marginalised. I know from experience that one can never, ever assume that people will not respond to opportunities to learn. On the other hand, I am critical of my own experience and one of the reasons I undertook this study was to test the veracity of my own convictions.

Reflexivity such as in this foreword is fundamental to this research which is subjective and co-constructed with participants in the study. Reflexivity is the strategy by which I help the reader to understand quite why I have theorised in the way that I have done. It is necessary to flag “biases, values and personal background” (Creswell, 2014, p. 187) in a way that will inform judgements about my work.

All the people in this study have given generously to this study in ways that I did not anticipate. Together we have undertaken this thesis and I am grateful to all.

# Acronyms

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AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AISC	Australian Industry Skills Committee
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
AVETMISS	Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard
CEDA	Committee for Economic Development of Australia
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
conGT	Constructivist grounded theory
DDA	Disability Discrimination Act
DSG	Department of State Growth
ERTO	Enterprise RTO
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NASWD	National Agreement on Skills and Workforce Development
NCVER	National Council for Vocational Education Research
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NPASR	National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform
NPG	New public governance
NPM	New public management

NVEAC	National VET Equity Advisory Council
NVR	National VET regulation
PIAAC	Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PISA	International Student Assessment
RTO	Registered training organisation
TVA	Total VET Activity
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNEVOC	International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization.
VET	Vocational education and training

# Glossary of Terms

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**Access and equity:** “A policy or set of strategies that ensures that vocational education and training (VET) is responsive to the needs of all members of the community” (*Glossary of VET*, 2016).

**Accredited program** “... leads to vocational qualifications ... recognised across Australia. Only registered training organisations ... such as TAFE, private providers, enterprise registered training organisations and vocational divisions of universities can provide nationally recognised training” (*Glossary of VET*, 2016).

**Australian Human Rights Framework** is a response by the Australian Government to the National Human Rights Consultation recommending a human rights act or charter (Attorney-General’s Department, 2010).

**Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA)** is the national regulator for VET (*Glossary of VET*, 2016).

**Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS)** is “the Australian national data standard that ensures consistent and accurate ... vocational education and training (VET) information about students” (*Glossary of VET*, 2016).

**Axiology** is the “theory of value” (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary).

**Barriers** to education comprise liquid barriers concerning finances; situational barriers arising from one’s situation in life at a given time; institutional barriers of practices and procedures that discourage or prevent participation; and the information barrier which concerns realisation of the benefits of learning as well as information about individual needs and nature of opportunities (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013)

**Capability** has “organising elements” which are: self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; social management (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2013, p. 7).

**Common law** denotes the principles and rules of action of case law rather than legislative enactments. Common law derives authority from judicial interpretation of community customs and traditions that evolved over centuries. The common-law system prevails in England, the United States, and other countries colonised by England (The Free/Legal Dictionary).

**Constructivism** is a social scientific perspective of how people create their realities. Subjectivity comes into view assuming that people, including researchers, construct their own realities. Constructivists gain multiple views of reality and acknowledge its construction (Charmaz, 2014).

**Critical theory** perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class and gender (Creswell, 2014).

**Delimited** research in grounded theory refers to a process of reduction of insights and categories as theory develops. A study that is delimited has boundaries arising from theorising that “... could otherwise become an overwhelming task” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 111).

**De-centred governance** focuses on interpretation and “social construction of policy networks through the ability of people to create meanings” (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003, p. 62). De-centred governance represents (i) a “... shift of topos (themes) from institutions to meaningful practices” (p. 64) (my brackets); (ii) a rejection of the positivist treatment of networks as social structures from which one can read off “actions, beliefs and ideas of individuals” (p. 65).

**Equity** is defined in the Organisation of Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD) Policy Brief as fairness and inclusion (S. Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007a). The policy brief states that equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012b, p. 2).

**Equity Policy and Action Plan** sets out criteria for public funding to “... have a positive influence on the following Focus Areas for disadvantaged Tasmanians: Participation and Achievement in VET; Employment Outcomes; Responsiveness of the Training System” (Skills Tasmania, 2009).

**Enterprise RTO (ERTO)**: A business enterprise operating registered training organisations (RTOs) under the Australian vocational education and training (VET) Quality Framework.

**Epistemology** The branch of philosophy that deals with the varieties, grounds and validity of knowledge (Oxford Shorter Dictionary).

**Evidence-based policy** is “... rigorous analysis of policy and program options, with the intention of providing useful inputs for policy makers in their ongoing consideration of policy development and improvement ... However, the processing of this information and expert knowledge is problematic and highly variable across organisations” (Head & Crowley, 2015, p. 1). The processing attracts

critique as to whether good policy making is linked with good information, or whether the concepts are undermined by political and organisational influences (Head & Crowley, 2015).

**Formal theory:** “A theoretical rendering of a generic issue or process that cuts across several substantive areas of study. The concepts in a formal theory are abstract and general, and the theory specifies the links between these concepts” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 343).

**Gerund** is an English verbal noun that ends with *ing* (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 5<sup>th</sup> ed.).

**Governance:** Definitions of governance vary in political science and social science. Governance, in academic circles, is interpreted broadly as “the setting of rules, the application of rules, and the enforcement of rules” (Kjaer, 2004, p. 10). Governance includes “all those interactive arrangements in which public as well as private actors participate aimed at solving societal problems ...” (Kooiman, 1999, p. 70).

**Governance technology:** “... technical and numerical mediation to measure equity ... into a series of abstract representations in graphs, grids, league tables and indices” (Lingard et al., 2014, p. 711).

**Grounded theory:** A rigorous method of conducting research in which researchers construct conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive theoretical analyses from data and subsequently checking their theoretical interpretations. Thus, grounded theorists directly ground their theory in data (Charmaz, 2014).

**Human rights recession:** A term to denote the receding of ratification and implementation of human rights conventions (AHRC, 2015a; Triggs, 2016).

**Humanist:** A person concerned with or interested in human affairs (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary).

**Interpretivism** is the state of explaining the meaning of something (Shorter Oxford Dictionary).

**Joint Committee on Human Rights** is the Australian parliamentary committee that scrutinises bills and legislation with respect to human rights (Attorney-General’s Department).

**Learner disposition** is the necessary internalisation of *habitus* that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions. It is beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt (Bourdieu, 2010).

**Macro-level** “theories explain larger aggregates, such as social institutions, cultural systems, and whole societies” (Creswell, 2014, p. 54)

**Meso-level** “theories link the micro and macro levels. These are theories of organizations, social movement, or communities ...” (Creswell, 2014, p. 54).

**Micro-level** “theories provide explanations limited to small slices of time, space, or numbers of people...” (Creswell, 2014, p. 54).

**National Council for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)** is Australia’s principal research and evaluation organisation for VET (NCVER, 2016b). The NCVER mandate is to inform and influence decisions of government, industry and providers. NCVER is a not-for-profit company owned by the Australian Department of Education and Training with a multi-layered authorising environment including Australian and state/territory governments, industry and registered training providers. NCVER is custodian of Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) (NCVER, 2016c) and the VOCEDplus database (NCVER, 2016c).

**National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform (NPASR)** is a partnership between the Commonwealth of Australia and all states and territories. The NPASR aims to “contribute to reform of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system to deliver a productive and highly skilled workforce which contributes to Australia’s economic future, and to enable all working age Australians to develop the skills and qualifications needed to participate effectively in the labour market” (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b).

**National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC)** is the former body charged with advising NCVER on equity matters in VET in Australia (NCVERb, 2016).

**National VET Regulation (NVR) Standards:** These standards aim to ensure nationally consistent, high-quality training and assessment services for the clients of Australia’s vocational education and training (VET) system.

**Neo-liberalism** is the term used to conceptualise a system that emphasises economic growth through marketisation and privatisation together with the minimisation of government and the centralising of market principles (Colclough & Manor, 1993; Peck, 2010; Smith, 1776).

**Neo-social:** “... an elision of the economic and social domains of governance to recast all aspects of human life in terms of an individual’s potential for self-capitalisation in a market society” (Savage, 2013, p. 711).

**Network governance** focuses on how “self-organizing interorganisational networks” function both with and without government to provide public services (Rhodes, 1997). This contrasts with public policy governance which is how “policy elites and policy networks interact to create and govern the public policy process” (Osborne, 2010, p. 6).

**New Public Governance (NPG)** is a framework through which to consider public governance with elements of: institutional and network theory; plural and pluralist state; with a focus on the organisation in its environment and on negotiation of values, meaning and relationships; a dispersed and contested value base (Osborne, 2010).

**New Public Management (NPM)** comprises: lessons from private-sector management; growth of “hands on” management and of “arm’s length” organisations where policy formulation is organisationally distant from implementation; focus on entrepreneurial leadership; input and output control and evaluation together with performance management and audit; disaggregation of basic cost units; growth of markets, competition and contracts as devices for service delivery and resource allocation within public services (Osborne, 2010).

**Objectivism**, in philosophy, is the “belief that certain things (especially moral truths) exist apart from human knowledge of perception of them” (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary).

**Ontology** is the science or study of being (Shorter Oxford Dictionary).

**Positivism**: An epistemology subscribing to a unitary scientific method consisting of objective systematic observation and experimentation in an external world (Charmaz, 2014, p. 344).

**Pragmatism** is a philosophical position that views reality as indeterminate, fluid and open to multiple interpretations. Truth is relativist and provisional. Pragmatism assumes that people are active and creative and through actions people come to know the world (Charmaz, 2014, p. 344).

**Private benefit** is the economic and potential social benefit associated with employment. Economic benefit includes higher salaries, savings, better working conditions and professional mobility. Social benefit may include: improved self-esteem, communication skills, and happiness; increased engagement or re-engagement (i.e. the feeling of being given a “second chance”); improved understanding of “lifelong learning”; improved life expectancy; increased consumer choice efficiency; and intergenerational benefits (Deloitte, 2011b, p. 40).

**Public administration** comprises key elements of “the dominance of the rule of law”; set rules and guidelines; central role for the bureaucracy; “politics-administration” split within public



organisations; commitment to incremental budgeting; hegemony of the professional in public service delivery (Osborne, 2010, p. 2).

**Public benefit** from education involves outcomes that are economy-wide. For example, increased education has been associated with: labour force participation gains; labour force productivity gains; GDP gains (through both productivity and participation (Deloitte, 2011b).

**Public governance** comprises socio-political governance; public policy governance; administrative governance; contract governance; network governance (Osborne, 2010, p. 6)

**Public value** refers to efficiency, accountability, and equity as motivational forces that do not rely on rules or incentives to drive public service reform (Stoker, 2006).

**Reflexivity:** The researcher's scrutiny of the research experience, decisions and interpretations in ways that bring him or her into the process. A reflexive stance informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants and represents them in written reports (Charmaz, 2014).

**Registered Training Organisation (RTO):** "Training providers registered by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) or in some cases, a state or territory registering and accrediting body to deliver training and/or conduct assessments and issue nationally recognised qualifications in accordance with the Australian Quality Training Framework or the VET Quality Framework. RTOs include TAFE colleges and institutes, adult and community education providers, private providers, community organisations, schools, higher education institutions, commercial and enterprise training providers, industry bodies and other organisations meeting the registration requirements" (*Glossary of VET*, 2016).

**Situated interpretivism** is the meaning of something that is located in situations that become fundamental units of analysis in knowledge production. Situations have power and consequences independent of the interpretation within them (Clarke, 2005).

**Skills Tasmania**, located within the Department of State Growth, is the Tasmanian government purchaser of skills programs from Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).

**Social categorisation** is the process of placing people into sub-populations or collectivities based on any given criteria. People are frequently categorised according to socio-demographic characteristics such as age, ethnicity, race, social class, gender, sexuality and disability (Britton, 2007, p. 62).

**Social constructionism:** “A theoretical perspective that assumes that people create social reality or realities through individual and collective actions” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 344). Charmaz (2014) distinguishes conGT from social constructionism inasmuch as conGT emphasises that “subjectivity is inseparable from social existence” (p. 14).

**Social equity:** The fair, just and equitable management of public institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice and equity in the formation of public policy (McSherry, 2013).

**Social inclusion** refers to “... a society for all, in which every individual has an active role to play. Such a society is based on fundamental values of equity, equality, social justice, and human rights and freedoms, as well as on the principles of tolerance and embracing diversity” (UNESCO).

**Statement of Compatibility** is the statement submitted by the Joint Committee on Human Rights to scrutinise bills and legislation with respect to human rights (Attorney-General’s Department).

**Substantive theory:** A theoretical interpretation or explanation of a delimited problem in an area of enquiry, e.g. in formal organisations or education (Charmaz, 2014).

**Supply and demand** in the VET market derives from clients who receive the training and institutions that provide the training, respectively (Freeland, 1990). The demand is usually from the learner but may also be from the employer (Desjardins & Rubenson).

**Symbolic interactionism:** Symbols, ideas as well as things, arise from each individual’s interpretation of the world. Interactionism is the process by which people draw on their engagement with others, make their interpretations of reality, and then decide how to behave. The individual’s symbols and his or her interactions with them are a matter for the researcher to explore (Charmaz, 2014).

**Symbols** in symbolic interactionism can be physical objects or vocal gestures, especially language, and are tools of interaction from which minds and actions emerge (Mead, 1934).

**Total VET Activity (TVA):** From 1 January 2014, TVA is an Australian government initiative which expands the collection of data on nationally accredited vocational education and training (VET) activity from public providers to include data from all providers.

**Traditions and dilemmas** is the concept that explores the diverse ways in which situated agents are changing the boundaries of state and civil society by constantly remaking practices as their beliefs change in response to dilemmas (Rhodes, 2007).

**Training packages** “... define the competencies required by different occupations and industries and describe how these competencies may be packaged into nationally recognised and portable qualifications that comply with the Australian Qualifications Framework” (*Glossary of VET*, 2016).

**VET FEE-HELP** provides government loans to help eligible students enrolled in higher-level VET courses (Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Vocational Graduate Certificate or Vocational Graduate Diploma) pay their tuition fees (*Glossary of VET*, 2016).

**Vocational education and training (VET)**: Post-compulsory education and training, excluding degree and higher-level programs delivered by further education institutions, which provides people with occupational or work-related knowledge and skills. VET also includes programs which provide the basis for subsequent vocational programs (*Glossary of VET*, 2016).

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

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*Is it inevitable that within the push to economic and cultural globalisation, and the constraints of corporatist managerial structures, equity and access issues will be perceived in time as matters of 'welfare' toward the 'inadequate' rather than as matters of human rights. (Abbott-Chapman & Easthope, 1998)*

## 1.1 Matters of Human Rights in Vocational Education and Training (VET)

The nub of this study is equity in vocational education and training (VET), or in technical and vocational education (TVET) which is an international term of use (UNESCO 2016). In Australia, VET has a nexus with equity as the provider of skills “targeted to the less advantaged population” (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016, p. 6). In most countries, including in Australia and the state of Tasmania from where I gather empirical evidence, skills are essential for employment, health and well-being. The OECD contends that skills seep even more deeply to “... beliefs about one’s impact on the political process, trust in others, and participation in volunteer or associative activities” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013, p. 246). The focus of this study is on Tasmanian adults experiencing disadvantage who may be “second chance” learners in whom VET has a key interest (Karmel, 2010a).

This chapter presents the background to the study; research rationale; research aims; intellectual puzzle and research questions; qualitative research; constructivist grounded theory; social justice research; scope of the study; and structure of the thesis.

## 1.2 Background to the Study

There is a nexus between rising global inequality and the equity gap in VET (United Nations Development Program, 2015; OECD, 2016). Learners experiencing disadvantage are most likely to approach VET rather than other educational institutions to improve their job and life prospects (Buddelmeyer & Polidano, 2016; Karmel, 2010b; Karmel & Lim, 2013; Lamb, 2011; National VET Equity Advisory Council, 2011). The National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) (2011) proposed that learners experiencing disadvantage are neglected in research and that new ways had to be found to “embed equity in VET” (p. 2). This study takes up the intellectual puzzle as to how to embed

equity in VET through empirical evidence gathered from: adult learners experiencing disadvantage, teachers and trainers, policy-makers in government and in vocational education and training organisations. The study traverses public, private and community registered training organisations (RTOs) in VET.

The empirical evidence is the heart of this study and the background, or context as the methodology prefers, developed with emerging evidence. In this study, the background to equity in VET coalesced around human rights as evidence was gathered. Two years after the beginning of this research, the Australian Human Rights Commission (2015) made recommendations to the Australian Government to draw attention to Australia's accountability to protect and promote the human rights of VET learners under the World Program for Human Rights Education (United Nations, 2016).

Consistent with international agreements, the World Program advocates for human rights education in VET as well as in the tertiary education sector generally (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015a). The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) recommendations (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015a) are complementary to Australia's *National Disability Strategy* (Council of Australian Governments, 2013) which aims for equal opportunity in education and all areas of life for people with disabilities.

I discuss equity from national and international perspectives, and skills policy for VET in the following sections, pointing to the implications for equity in a marketised VET sector.

## **1.2.1 Equity**

### **1.2.1.1 National**

Australian and Tasmanian skills policy (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b; Skills Tasmania, 2009) is silent on equity as human rights in skills policy although Gonski, Boston, Greiner, Lawrence, Scales and Tannock recognise the "human rights imperative" (Gonski et al., 2011). The Ministerial Council, comprising all relevant ministers of Australian states and territories, signed the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (the Melbourne Declaration) (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008) defining equity as fairness and inclusion, contributing to social cohesion, encouraging high expectations and promoting a culture of excellence. Equity and excellence came together in the Melbourne Declaration such that the goal is equality of *opportunity* and more equitable *outcomes* (p. 12) for people experiencing disadvantage. While in the context of young people, the definition is consistent with human rights positions (S. Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007a) for all citizens.

Nonetheless, in Australia it is argued that there is an equity gap in skills outcomes (Beddie, 2015; Leung, McVicar, Polidano, & Zhang, 2014; National VET Equity Advisory Council [NVEAC], 2011). In 2016, from the Total VET Activity (National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER], 2016b) there also emerge concerns about lack of data to make a real assessment about equity outcomes as matter of human rights. The equity gap was of concern to the National VET Equity Advisory Council (2011) when it reported that in VET considerable success with pilot programs was not translating into embedded policy change for ongoing improvement in outcomes (Figgis, Butorac, Clayton, Meyers, Dickie, Malley & McDonald, 2007).

### **1.2.1.2 International**

Equity in VET is problematic internationally. It was recognised in VET research engaging all OECD member countries that “if much has been achieved, there has also been much disappointment” (S. Field et al., 2007a, p. 3). Nine years on, OECD (2016) research continues to raise concerns about a global broadening inequality gap with the additional exhortation to find ways to measure growth other than through GDP.

International positions inform the definition of equity used in this study. I draw on the previously mentioned Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008) and the United Nations Development Program, European Union (EU), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD). These are compatible with a “rebirth of VET” (McGrath, 2012, p. 1) concerned with expanding human capabilities in ways where there is emphasis on the promotion of human rights (United Nations Development Program, 2015).

I next outline contextual policy positions in Australia and Tasmania.

## **1.2.2 Skills Policy for VET**

### **1.2.2.1 Australia**

Australian skills policy is based on intergovernmental relationships between the Australian Government and all states and territories (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b). VET is the largest education sector in Australia (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016, p. 6). The sector has experienced declining funding since 2012 together with a shift to funding that is proportionately greater from the Australian Government than from states and territories (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016, p. 9).

Australian skills policy for the VET sector from 1992 has been increasingly market driven (Bowman & McKenna, 2016) and subject to National Competition Policy (Australian Government, 2015). The NPASR (COAG, 2012b) funds Total VET Activity (TVA) (NCVER, 2016b) and VET FEE-HELP. Each of



these indicates some of the challenges facing skills policy in Australia and I next touch on these matters.

Total VET Activity (TVA) (NCVER, 2016b), in reporting data for the first time in 2016 across public and private registered training organisations (RTOs), finds that the marketisation of VET means there is double the learner population compared with previous estimates that were based on public provider, or TAFE, data (p. 5). The corollary is that the TAFE publicly funded sector is not the largest provider (p. 5). This has ramifications for equity policy as the government has more influence over the public provider regarding equity outcomes (NCVER, 2016b).

VET FEE-HELP is an Australian Government funded scheme promoted as a “study-now-pay-later” loan scheme (TAFE NSW, 2016). In 2016, the Australian Government published the discussion paper “Re-designing VET FEE-HELP” (Department of Education and Training, 2016c) which acknowledges that VET FEE-HELP has led to growing course costs and student debts in a period “... characterised by serious concerns over the quality, probity and conduct of some providers, low completion rates and unethical practices” (p. 5). These matters impinge on skills policy in Tasmania the context of which I next discuss.

### ***1.2.2.2 Tasmania***

The empirical evidence of this study is drawn from the small island state of Tasmania. NCVER proposes that reasons for considerable variation in participation across Australian states and territories relate to population demographics, supply and demand factors including competition from universities at higher qualification levels, local labour market conditions, availability of courses and providers. Tasmania has a population of 517,000 as estimated in 2015 (ABS, 2016) and one university (University of Tasmania) geographically located in the state, although other universities’ courses are available by online or distance mode. At 6.6%, the unemployment rate in August 2016 was the highest in Australia compared with the national average of 5.6% (ABS, 2016). In March 2016, there were 13,600 learners in publicly funded VET programs with an estimated 7,000 learners (all ages) in the lowest-level certificates (NCVER, 2016a). The participation rate of Tasmanian learners aged 15 to 64 across public and private providers in 2014 was 23.2% (NCVER, 2016b) compared with a national average of 23.3%. Tasmania has one public provider that is based in the state and approximately 120 (Skills Tasmania, 2016b) state-based private registered training organisations (RTOs). Other nationally registered providers do deliver into Tasmania.

In Tasmania, in 2015, the administration of skills policy shifted from the Department of Education to the Department for State Growth (DSG). The Tasmanian VET system is the joint responsibility of the

Minister for State Growth and the Minister for Education and Training. Within the terms of the NPASR, the DSG administers skills (including equity) objectives for the public provider of vocational education and training under the *Tasmania Training and Workforce Development Act 2013* (Tas) and in VET generally under the *Vocational Education and Training Act 1994* (Tas). The Department of State Growth also administers the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009) to annually fund contested equity programs delivered by private providers and the public provider. The scope of the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009) empowers the Department of State Growth to purchase programs for skills outcomes for Tasmanians who are socially categorised as disadvantaged and who require assistance to overcome barriers to participation in training and the workforce.

## **1.3 Research Rationale**

The research rationale of this study focuses on individuals' need for skills to work and a widening inequality gap (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012a). The UNDP's (United Nations Development Program, 2015) position is that: "there has never been a worse time to be a worker with only ordinary skills and abilities, because computers, robots and other digital technologies are acquiring the skills and abilities at an extraordinary speed" (p. 10). In addition, inequality gaps are broadening (Lamb, Jackson, Waltab, & Huo, 2015; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012a) to the detriment of individuals as well as to broader society.

In Australia, in response to the equity gap, NVEAC (2011) proposed a Blueprint for Equity in which it was revealed that the sector to which people experiencing disadvantage are drawn – to VET – has been the lesser recipient of reform and funding compared to primary and university education sectors. There appear to be no further publications directed to strategies to address the equity gap.

## **1.4 Research Aims**

The aims of the study are to improve understanding of: how to more effectively represent adult learners experiencing disadvantage for the purposes of interpretation in skills policy; and how to incorporate equity as human rights into skills policy.

## **1.5 Intellectual Puzzle and Research Questions**

The intellectual puzzle as a framework for research questions is: how might equity be embedded in skills policy?

The research questions that evolved, consistent with constructivist grounded theory (conGT), are: how is equity defined and implemented in skills policy; how might learner disposition inform equity objectives in skills policy.

## 1.6 Qualitative Research

Traditionally, research into equity is primarily quantitative, or evidence-based (Lingard, Sellar, & Savage, 2014; Weller, 2015). However, equity is a matter of social justice which, as researchers argue, calls for qualitative enquiry (Charmaz, 2014; Denzin, 2014; Clarke, 2005). In this study, qualitative methodology was selected to increase understanding from a human development perspective of equity as a matter of human rights and social justice. The appropriate sources of evidence were interviews, observation of context and conditions and analysis of extant materials.

I sought to understand how to embed equity into VET by centralising the learning experience of the learner experiencing disadvantage within teaching and government policy structures. It was necessary to use a qualitative methodology that would link individual identities into broader worlds and make actions and processes visible (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory originated with Glaser and Strauss (1967) and was later developed by Charmaz (2014) in path-breaking ways (Denzin, 2014), and it is a highly suitable methodology by which to respond to national and international calls for more and different qualitative research in VET (Beddie, 2015; Marope, Chakroun, & Holmes, 2015).

From my own perspective, one of the attractions of the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967) is that they prized independence of thought, theorising and conceptualising as distinct from description and reliance on previous conceptions. Charmaz (2014) enhanced the Glaser and Strauss approach with acknowledgement of the subjectivity of research. Glaser, Strauss and Charmaz all challenge researchers to push boundaries, to not “deny the validity of their own scientific intelligence” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 7) and methodology.

Charmaz published *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2014) which included a chapter on conGT as a methodology for social justice research and I took part in Professor Charmaz’s two master classes following publication of her book. These opportunities all affirmed that the rationale of the study called for qualitative research that emphasised the co-construction of realities between researcher and participants and elevation of the significance of subjective experience.

## 1.7 Constructivist Grounded Theory

ConGT links constructivism and grounded theory. Constructivism does not seek objective truth but recognises multiple realities, is subjective and co-constructed, and is not value-free (Charmaz, 2014; Vygotsky, 1962; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Grounded theory provides a systematic, rigorous, conceptual method for analysing inducted evidence and for checking interpretation and theory (Charmaz, 2014). ConGT provides innovative, ground-breaking, eclectic, methodology (Denzin, 2014; Preissle, 2014) to address equity as a longstanding and intractable problem in public administration (Briggs, 2007). I prefer the constructivist approach because it produces theory, emphasises systematic analysis and focuses on action and process rather than description. The aspects of constructivism that especially attract me are: a view of the world as social and relational; the opportunity to co-construct with people I see as agentic as I work with them to generate evidence (Charmaz, 2014); focusing on situating interpretation in historical, social and situational conditions. My approach to method is systematic and consistent with Glaser and Strauss (1967) but my philosophic inclination is subjective and I therefore veer away from classic grounded theory to constructivist grounded theory. My long experience in policy analysis has shown me that objectivism in policy-making is unachievable; all is subjective and relational.

I sought in this study to explore different ways of how the research might “fit and work” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 338) for policy-makers. The methodology of conGT provides the next steps in the evolution of grounded theory with a “theory-methods package” (Keller & Charmaz, 2016, p. 5). The package explores basic social processes (Charmaz, 2014) relevant to the “theory *and* praxis” (Guy & McCandless, 2012, p. 29) of equity in skills policy. I also chose conGT to undertake social justice research which, as an emerging area, requires its own section as follows.

## 1.8 Social Justice Research

Researchers have posited that social justice is a matter of “speaking truth to power” (Conklin, 2003; Wildavsky, 1975). Wildavsky (1975) wrote that power is “government”. Social justice research in its most basic form in this study therefore transpired as an exploration of the nature of truth as objectivism or multiple realities and of how government policy affects people experiencing disadvantage. The definition of social justice has Greek and Roman philosophical roots and is elusive; for the purposes of this study, the definition of social justice coexists with expression of human rights, fairness and equality (Bates, 2007; Sturman, 1997).

Research shows social justice – and its underpinnings of equality and equity – is neglected generally in policy and in academic research (Denzin, 2014; Charmaz, 2014; Clarke, 2005; Lingard & Gale, 2016). Education researchers (Tobin and Kincheloe 2006; Wiseman, 2010) argue for more critical research to help inform government policy but lament the global constraints of evidence-based, managerialistic policy. In a review of 40 years of educational research on the agenda of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Lingard and Gale (2010) argued for a “new social imaginary” and “researcherly disposition” in education that will commit educational research to improve both policy and practice, to be a field of education and a field of policy. Lingard (2013) uses the terms “research *of*” and “research *for*” (p. 120) policy where “research *of*” sits within a critical framework. Bartlett (1989) had stated this in simple terms of the need to focus on the “state of education in Australia” (p. 28). The state of education will inevitably involve equity which NVEAC (2011) argued is not a focus in research in vocational education.

As a new researcher with a law degree and social justice background, I found it baffling that I was not to find a smorgasbord of social justice approaches to underpin equity in VET in law, or social science, or education, or elsewhere. Research suggested that absence of social justice research generally lies in the traditional privileging of a macro, politico-economic (Anderson & Snow, 2001) approach to the detriment of understanding micro, local, lived experience (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Anderson & Snow, 2001; Charmaz, 2014; Lather 2006). Charmaz (2014) proposes that the macro approach was founded in the sociological preoccupation with social stratification and social constructionism together with researchers’ predilection to seek objectivist truth.

There is a new turn to social justice research supported by major social researchers (Clarke, 2005; Charmaz, 2014; Birks & Mills, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Madison, 2011). Charmaz (2014) has emphatically broken with the objectivist tradition and provided the framework for rigorous and systematic, subjective research which will serve social justice research. However, as with grounded theory itself, there is not a great deal of research as to how to design and represent social justice research (Hunter, Murphy, Grealish, Casey, & Keady, 2011; Nagel, Burns, Tilley, & Aubin, 2015; Wu & Beaunae, 2012).

Against an ambiguous background, I sought to “imagine forward” (Lather 2013, p. 1) to ways that social justice research might be undertaken. ConGT promoted “theoretical playfulness” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 137) as a way of trying out new ideas for intractable social justice problems. Specifically, Charmaz (2014) enquired how policy should and ought to invoke definitions of race, class, gender, age and disability in pursuit of strategies involving social justice. ConGT presented as the most

suitable methodology to design a framework for social justice research to fit the intellectual puzzle of how to embed equity in VET.

Denzin (2014) argues that there is a “paradigm war” between entrenched evidence-based methods, and humanistic ways of looking at reality. The paradigm war, previously confined to academic realms, is now also between methods of government policy analysis and methods of academic research (Denzin, 2014). Social justice research demands the humanistic approach. If, Denzin proposes, social justice research is disabled by dominant evidence-based methods in government, there arises the state of the “politics of evidence” (Denzin, 2014; Denzin & Giardina, 2009). Denzin (2014) contends that the politics of evidence poses a new crisis of representation of evidence in government decision-making as well as academic research. Denzin (2014) urges researchers to undertake research that directly engages government policy, to take research to the government policy table. The renewed crisis is intrinsic to this study about how to better understand equity within government policy.

## 1.9 Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is delimited in grounded theory terms; it is a process of reduction of insights and categories as theory develops (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Disclosure of a delimited process informs the reader that what may appear to be gaps in the research are not oversights but strategic intention. In this study, although they may be significant issues for VET and workforce development policy, I have not included, for example: prospective employers as participants; comprehensive economic perspectives; and detailed analysis in the context of National Competition Policy (2007). Consistent with grounded theory and conGT, the theory drove the study into adult learners experiencing disadvantage and equity in skills policy.

The scope of the research is selected from a range of initiatives of Skills Tasmania for “... developing strategies and providing support, advice, opportunities and funding to deliver quality training to meet the needs of Tasmanians and our industries” (2016). The empirical analysis is delimited to the program specifically designed to address equity. The *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009) was an annual contested equity program funded by Skills Tasmania (2009) involving registered training organisations (RTOs). The *Equity Policy and Action Plan* was redesigned in 2016 with the similar goal to address disadvantage in Tasmania. This study does not intentionally include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in recognition of significant cultural issues that call for separate, more comprehensive research. Because of ethical considerations, I did not interview people in the criminal

justice system. Participants did include, however, people who are central in devising and implementing education and skills policy in Tasmanian Prison Services.

## 1.10 Structure of the Thesis

Consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), the structure of this study and organisation of the chapters is designed to fit the specific purpose of the study. The study comprises a Foreword and seven chapters. The Foreword is a reflexive statement which is compulsory for constructivist grounded theory. I have described my professional and personal background to show the style of thought which gave rise to this research.

I explain the representation of evidence and theorising at the beginning of each chapter and discuss issues of representation in conGT more fully in Chapter 3.

I set out a summary of the chapters:

**Chapter 1** (this chapter) introduces the background to skills development and equity and to the law of equity in education. The remaining sections are the intellectual puzzle and research questions; qualitative research; constructivist grounded theory; social justice research; scope of the study; and structure of the thesis.

**Chapter 2.** Following a brief introduction to the context of equity in skills policy, this is further developed in five parts: representation of context; context to *habitus*: Tasmanian traditions and dilemmas; the context of equity in VET nationally and in Tasmania; human rights and equity in VET; the context of paradigms of public administration and policy analysis as a methodological paradigm.

**Chapter 3** presents the methodology comprising: representation of methodology; intellectual puzzle and research questions; philosophical positions; research paradigm; research methodology; theoretical perspectives; research strategies; methodological considerations and choices for this study.

**Chapter 4** presents methods with respect to: research design; processes for recruitment of participants; processes for interviewing; description and exemplification of grounded theory guidelines and matters of rigour.

**Chapter 5** is the substantive grounded theory of “problematic equity” which is analysis of empirical evidence. The theory comprises the phenomenon; the basic social organisational

problem; the basic social organisational process; and observations and symbolic interaction to theoretically interpret the substantive grounded theory.

**Chapter 6** is the formal theory of “alternative equity” comprising the literature comparison with the substantive grounded theory and the responses to the intellectual puzzle and research questions as to how equity might be embedded into skills policy.

**Chapter 7** presents the conclusion to the study addressing the headings of: introduction; achievement of study aims; contributions to research; evaluating constructivist grounded theory methodology; limitations to this study; further research; recommendations.



# Chapter 2: The Context of Equity in Skills Policy

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## 2.1 Introduction

Traditionally in theses this chapter is a literature review. Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, I have taken a different approach to how and why literature is used and to how I represent the theory of the study. I introduce this chapter under the headings of context of equity in VET in Australia and the structure of the chapter to lay the foundations for the chapter.

### 2.1.1 Context of Equity

In the following section I explore the context of equity as: equity, social equity, equality; and embedding equity.

#### ***2.1.1.1 Equity, Social Equity, Equality***

In this study, the term “equity” is used because it is the term of use in public and education policy. Equity is approached also as a normative public value (Bozeman & Johnson, 2014; Bryson, Crobsy, & Bloomberg, 2014; Kelly, Mulgan, & Muers, 2002; Moore, 2013) from perspectives of fairness and inclusion.

“Equity” is interpreted according to the Australian and OECD published definition of fairness and inclusion in education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; S. Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007b; Ministerial Council on Education, 2008). The definition of “social equity” as it has developed amongst public administration theorists might apply equally and this is:

The fair, just and equitable management of public institutions serving the public directly or by contract; and the fair and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice and equity in the formation of public policy (McSherry, 2013).

The term “equity” in policy and social sciences is sometimes used interchangeably with “equality” which can be converted to mathematical measure, although equity is more flexible and will invite ethical considerations (Guy & McCandless, 2012; McSherry, 2013). In human rights law, Branson (2009) emphasises the distinction between equality and substantive equality. Substantive equality

recognises that all people are not the same. The differences should be responded to but the focus is on quality of outcomes, or opportunity. Definitions of equity, and equality, will vary across and within disciplines. A key premise is that equity involves normative notions of fairness and justice and not everyone will have the same ideas of what is just and fair (McSherry, 2013). Charting a way to embed equity into VET will depend on consensus of what equity involves and this is not always clear.

### **2.1.1.2 Embedding Equity**

The NVEAC Blueprint for Reform (2011) raised the puzzle of how equity might be embedded into VET. In the Blueprint, NVEAC (2011) showed that the benefits of VET are unevenly distributed to the detriment of learners experiencing disadvantage. Other commentators since 2011 (e.g. Beddie, 2015; Griffin, 2014; McVicar & Tabasso, 2016) assert that there is an equity gap. NVEAC's Blueprint continues as useful context with its several proposals for reform, two of which I interpreted as fundamental to improved understanding of equity within skills policy. First, the Blueprint (2011) argued for greater understanding of existing and potential learners. NVEAC noted that while there are good examples among providers of engaging with learners' life circumstances, there needs to be more "systemic inclusion" (p. 43) and action with regard to learners. Second, the Blueprint (2011) sought to not just "add on" but to "embed equity into the DNA of VET" (p. 2). In this chapter I contextualise the intellectual puzzle, drawing on concepts of the substantive grounded theory which emerged as: productivity policy; public administration paradigms; public sector methodology for policy analysis; and human rights.

Consistent with conGT (Charmaz, 2014), the empirical evidence, not preconceptions, drove the research into these areas. This chapter is not a traditional literature review. In this and following chapters I provide a "representation of ..." section to clarify why chapters are approached in a way.

## **2.2 Structure of the Chapter**

The structure of the chapter depicts VET in a broad framework but always with reference to learners experiencing disadvantage. The context of equity for learners experiencing disadvantage in skills policy is presented in five parts:

Representation of Context: I am reflexive about the methodological significance of context in this study.

Context to *habitus*: Tasmanian traditions and dilemmas. I describe traditions and dilemmas as an analytic tool to contextualise Tasmanian learners experiencing disadvantage.

Contextual policy

Contextual human rights

Contextual research and literature

Each section ends with “key concepts” except for the first section. The chapter progressively builds the concepts and culminates in:

“contextual observations: skills policy and equity as a matter of human rights”.

## 2.2.1 Representation of Context

Consistent with conGT, this study emphasises *contextualised* literature analysis (Charmaz, 2014, p. 243). The context of equity in skills policy is built on the contexts of the originating intellectual puzzle as well as the potential formal theory (Chapters 5 and 6). Consistent with conGT, the context of equity is therefore an integration of the analysis of empirical evidence and of the literature before and after the grounded theory was formed.

There is emerging research about how to represent conGT in writing and how to locate literature in writing (Charmaz, 2014; Cheek, 2008; Dunne, 2011; Glaser, 2015; Nagel et al., 2015). Consistent with conGT, I elected to privilege empirical evidence over literature (Ramalho, Adams, Huggard, & Hoare, 2015, section 6), to defend and meet the challenges of writing grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Nagel et al., 2015). It followed therefore, that literature would respond to, not lead, inducted, emerging evidence. In this study, the purpose of the literature is intended not to exhaustively describe the research field but to “to fit the specific purpose and argument of his or her research report” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 307).

The use of the literature in this chapter responds to three foundational conGT tenets of contextualisation, conceptualisation and iteration (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 2014). *Context* has methodological meaning applied in this study. The literature is used as a contextualisation of the study (Dunne, 2011) to ensure that theory is grounded and not misrepresented or taken out of context (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). *Conceptualisation*, as distinct from description, means that the literature is not reviewed or described as a “theoretical background” (Ramalho et al., 2015, section 1). The literature is analysed with reference to concepts related to the theory that evolved from the study. Conceptualisation is an approach (Giske & Artinian, 2007; Glaser, 2001) which, in grounded theory, is foundational to later abstraction where data are left behind and the aim is “... lifting the *concepts* above the data and integrating them into a theory that explains the latent social pattern ...” [my emphasis] (Holton, 2008, p. 3). Finally, as Dunne (2011) predicted, in conGT it is not possible to represent the literature in a linear manner. Consistent with conGT, this study is *iterative*; the

literature searches were constantly evolving, and emerging theory and recently published literature had the effect of changing context and, as Charmaz (2014) foresaw, the research design itself. Dunne (2011) points out that grounded theorists may find that traditional formats are “inimical to the logical presentation of the study” (p. 120) and exhorts researchers to “... present their research in a manner which is most appropriate to their particular study and best communicates their findings” (p. 121). This I have attempted to do.

## 2.3 Context to *Habitus*: Tasmanian Traditions and Dilemmas

I preface that this section serves a secondary purpose as a reflexive statement to indicate some of the thought style (4.2) in this study as, while not born in the state, I am a Tasmanian committed to contributing to the island’s society and culture.

I required an internalised (Bourdieu, 2010) sociological base to contextualise learner disposition and personal individual agency. I abducted the term “traditions and dilemmas” from political science (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003) as a way of looking at *habitus* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2013) as a concept accessible to a policy audience (Bevir, Rhodes, & Weller, 2003). Traditions can be either collective, for example governmental, or individual, and are defined as “... a set of understandings someone receives during socialisation” (Bevir et al., 2003, p. 11). Bevir et al. (2003) emphasise that traditions must be seen “mainly as a first influence on people” (p. 11) subject to change in the course of events. The approach of traditions and dilemmas is interpretivist (Rhodes, 2011), consistent with conGT (Charmaz, 2014) methodology and is not a traditional approach in policy analysis. Bevir, Rhodes and Weller (Bevir et al., 2003) argue that traditional positivist policy analysis sometimes avoids the influence of tradition in the arguably mistaken belief that individuals are quite autonomous and do not react to interpretation of their traditions and dilemmas.

I draw heavily on the *Griffith Review* publication of *Tasmania: The Tipping Point* (Schultz & Cica, 2013) to discuss traditions and dilemmas. The purpose of the publication is to question: Where does Tasmania’s future lie? Has Tasmania reached a “tipping point”, politically, economically and culturally? (Schultz & Cica, 2013). The publication identified keen national and international interest in Tasmania, especially in a “darker reality that lies behind the seductive tourism brochures showcasing the state’s pristine wilderness, gourmet magazine articles celebrating its burgeoning food culture, and newspaper stories gasping at a world-leading art museum” (Schultz & Cica, 2013). This section draws on some of the essays from the *Griffith Review* together with other publications.

The following discussion covers factors of disadvantage with reference to aspects that are: associated with globalisation; historical; social; economic; and media-related, together with place and environmental aspects that represent symbols of the cultures within which VET students live and learn. I present these as aspects of the kind of socialisation to which Bevir, Rhodes and Weller refer (2003) refer. These are potential influences that Tasmanians experiencing disadvantage may receive, although not necessarily sustain, during socialisation.

### **2.3.1 Aspects of Globalisation**

It often transpires that we perceive our own performance in skills development within globalised comparisons originating out of the OECD, World Bank and UNESCO. Tasmanian education performance is compared with OECD measurements. The OECD undertakes measurement especially through the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Program for International Assessment of Adult competencies (PIAAC).

PISA and PIAAC measurements of the performance of Tasmanians are used in national research and benchmarking on which agreements between the state and the Australian Government are made – for example, the *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008) and the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Gonski et al., 2011). Media accounts and reviews about Tasmania (Dingle, 2013a) use global education data, especially OECD data and research. Understanding the traditions and dilemmas of Tasmanians is essential for anchoring skills and equity policy goals to local needs and conditions.

### **2.3.2 Aspects of History**

Historians cast Tasmania's past as different from other Australian states and with perspectives including those of Indigenous people, convicts and the British elite. Reynolds (2012) argues that Tasmanian history is characterised by a unique war with the Indigenous people. Van Diemen's Land – now Tasmania – sowed different seeds to those of other states in that the original inhabitants – Aborigines, or Indigenous people – were victims of acts of war against them by the incoming British settlers. Reynolds (2012) writes that in other parts of Australia "there was nothing comparable with the Black Line or the banishment to an offshore island" (p. 288).

The convict history of Tasmania is symbolised in the Port Arthur prison where the failure of penal reforms could be sufficient to drive many convicts mad (Flanagan, 1996). Convict history, Reynolds (2012) argues, is more central in the contemporary society of Tasmania where "sensitivity about the past of the kind common in Tasmania had no parallel in the other colonies" (p. 288). A cultural and

social legacy, also, Reynolds (2012) suggests, was “of irreverence and rejection of deference” (p. 288). Boyce (2008) argues that convicts, too, had an experience of the country that was far more transformative and gives evidence of the readiness of convicts to show that they could successfully adapt to new conditions. In contemporary Tasmania, the percentage of Tasmanians with convict origins is greater relative to the numbers with free settler ancestors (Boyce, 2008).

Timms (2013) proposes that in these origins of Tasmania, the elites of the colony sowed the first seeds of a “nourishing Enlightenment soil” (p. 24) originally nurtured by the progressive economic and social programs of Governor and Lady Franklin but nonetheless representing Van Diemen’s Land as “a made-to-measure testing ground” for new ideas. This is just one interpretation but it serves to juxtapose the differing historical influences that form understandings of the past by both Tasmanians and others observing Tasmania.

### **2.3.3 Aspects of Society**

The social aspects of Tasmania and Tasmanians are viewed across a wide positive and negative spectrum. Tasmania has presented better relative levels of social capital, or a “sense of efficacy and participation in groups” (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2014a). In 2014, compared to other states and territories, the ABS (2014a) reported that Tasmanians volunteered more, self-reported confidence in being able to have a say in the community, a high three-quarters of the population reported networks to access government information and reported feelings of trust and safety. Kilpatrick (2013) proposes that it is the social capital of Tasmania that may invoke the necessary leadership to determine “Tasmania’s future direction and how we can get there” (no page no. given).

On the one hand, there is a contemporary view that Tasmanians lack aspiration and a sense of innovation. Harwood describes the perceptions of Tasmanians as “... insular and backward, recalcitrant moderns” (Harwood, 2011). West (2013) argues that there is an intractable problem since “Tasmania has developed a way of life, a mode of doing things, a demographic, a culture and associated economy, that reproduces under-achievement generation after generation” (p. 51).

On the other hand, Ecclestone (2013) writes of a spirit of innovation in Tasmania when “confronting fundamental challenges” (p. 146). Similarly, Timms (2013) views Tasmanians as particularly idealistic and forward-looking people. He suggests that “if pressed, most would say they want [Tasmania] to become an example to the rest of the world, although what that actually means will depend on who you ask” (Timms, 2013, p. 27). Referencing the literature, it can be argued that traditions and dilemmas are reflected in contemporary views of the state, especially depicting a polemic (for

example, Ecclestone & Goodley, 2014; West, 2013) on the capability of Tasmanians to meet challenges of the future.

### **2.3.4 Aspects of the Economy**

Eslake (2016) posits that educational disadvantage in Tasmania has an impact on economic performance. The learning cultures in Tasmania are traditionally and presently regarded as negative (Eslake, 2016; Rothman et al., 2013; Schultz & Cica, 2013). Eslake demonstrates that Tasmania has spent more money on education relative to other states but has not seen results. It is argued that what is required is to reshape structures, expectations attitudes and community culture (M. Smith, 2015). Goodes (M. Smith, 2015) posed the idea of two Tasmanias: one where high-quality food was bountiful but where the population suffered proportionately high levels of nutrition-related disadvantage; where there can be high achievement in Booker prizes but a large part of the state is functionally illiterate.

In July 2016, the quarterly *State of the States* report showed Tasmania at the lowest of all the Australian states in economic performance although modest improvement had drawn the state closer to South Australia (CommSec, 2016). Tasmania generally has higher levels of economic disadvantage compared to other Australian states and territories (ABS, 2014b; M. Smith, 2015). Of the Australian states, Tasmania has the highest unemployment rate, the lowest GDP per capita and the lowest rates of educational achievement (ABS, 2013; 2014b; 2015a; Eslake, 2016). More than any other state or territory, Tasmanian households depend on government welfare, with about a third of households citing government pensions and allowances as the main source of household income (ABS, 2014b). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Tasmanian households are also least likely to be in the highest equivalised household income quintile.

There are polemic views about the reasons for Tasmania's poor economic performance (e.g. Schultz & Cica, 2013; Timms, 2013). For example, it is argued that the economy is continually weak, relying on public benefits or public sector jobs and, of the productive population, "only a tenth in the private wealth creation sector" (Timms, 2013, p. 8). However, it is also argued by Schulz and Cica that Tasmania is not a "mendicant state" (2013, p. 8) consistent with the proposition of Eccleston (2013), that the financial condition is symptomatic of more fundamental matters connected to problems of Australian federalism. Nonetheless, from earliest times, Tasmania did not enjoy the vigorous or consistent prosperity of other states. Reynolds (2012) writes that "no other State has been so often in depression or experienced such a persistent loss of population" (p. 289). Challenges for the future

are argued to include addressing a pattern of slow economic growth and at the same time to balance global competing claims for conservation and development (Reynolds, 2012).

### 2.3.5 Aspects of Media Representation

Media representation of Tasmanian learning culture is apposite to the way Tasmanians are perceived and how they perceive themselves. In the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) program *Background Briefing* entitled *A Literacy Deficit* (Dingle, 2013a), Radio National reported that a 2013 ABS report shows that half of 15- to 74-year-old Tasmanians are functionally illiterate and innumerate which leaves them without skills to meet the demands of the modern world. The program cited economist Saul Eslake and Grattan Institute Director of School Education, Dr Ben Jensen. Eslake expresses the view that low educational outcomes are intergenerational and are the single most important factor as to why productivity in Tasmania is lower than in other states (Dingle, 2013a). Jensen suggests that there is a “culture of low expectations” (Dingle, 2013a), reflecting the low aspiration position referred to earlier by West (2013).

Social media responses to the program from educators, parents and the general community (Dingle, 2013a) reflect the polemic views that surround discussion of Tasmania. Many commentators stridently support an idea of Tasmania as backward and going nowhere (Dingle, 2013a). Others on the same page (Dingle, 2013a) question the program in plausible ways: there is insufficient difference between the state’s metropolitan and rural data; there is lack of probing of regional Australian data with which Tasmania might be best compared; there are regions of Australia that have similar education outcomes to Tasmania; a key disincentive is lack of jobs; and employers find it difficult to source skilled employees.

The rebuttals to the *Background Briefing* (Dingle, 2013a) program, and the positions of Eslake and Jensen, might be inferred as the symbols of the negative traditional learning culture. There are other sources that represent similar views of the Tasmanian problem, e.g. Radio National broadcast again under the heading *Literacy Teachers Needed in Every Tasmanian School* (Dingle, 2013b). The media presentations referred to do not deeply probe causes for the claim of negative learning culture. Significantly for this study, generally commentators of this kind in the media come from an economic perspective within the global educational realm and limit opportunities for broader cultural and social discourse about education and disadvantage in Tasmania.



### 2.3.6 Aspects of Place and Environment

Researchers argue that the influence of the natural environment has contributed to the polemic social and cultural positions in Tasmania from the beginning of white history. The place and the “islandness” influenced the society and economy (Reynolds, 2012). In the 1980s, the latent and deep commitment to the environment coalesced culturally and politically to become the Green movement (Reynolds, 2012) that led to the first Green political party in the world. In the Labor movement also, Tasmania as place was central to policy. From the mid-1990s, Premier Bacon (Harwood, 2011) created a platform to inspire confidence by stimulating debate on the meaning of place to Tasmania.

An assessment of Tasmania will rely on consideration of Tasmania as “place” and its relation to the physical and natural environment (Angus, 1975). From the earliest white settlement, the “islandness” and the significance of the separation of Bass Strait from the continental mainland of Australia as well as from international and global affairs (Harwood, 2011) coloured the perceptions of the nature of the culture and economy of Tasmania. The close of the twentieth century is argued to have brought cultural change (Reynolds, 2012).

Writers and researchers see recent decades as a fundamental shift as to how Tasmanians see their island and themselves and, significantly, how they began to see where future opportunity might lie (Reynolds, 2012). Laird had written in 1975 (Angus, 1975, p. 7) of the battle for “... *rapprochement* between human aims and nature in Tasmania ...” but lamented that without reconciliation of conservation and economics, “... the picture must remain dismal” (p. 7) if we repeat past mistakes in destroying land and forests. Flanagan (1996) writes of the deep meaning of this combination of the natural and the human worlds. In 2012, Reynolds refers to the emergence of the importance of the natural world and the possibility of the hope it engenders not only for Tasmania but also globally (Reynolds, 2012). In the next section, I draw together all the above aspects of traditions and dilemmas to identify key concepts affecting this study of skills policy and equity.

### 2.3.7 Key Concepts for Skills Policy and Equity: Tasmanian Traditions and Dilemmas

Tasmania has consistently performed poorly in education compared to other states and territories (Eslake, 2016). In 2015, 64% of 15- to 64-year-olds held a qualification at Grade 12 or Certificate III equivalent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015b). The highest performers were at 84.5% and 77% (Australian Capital Territory and Victoria respectively). The next lowest performer (Northern Territory) was 10% higher than Tasmania. Tasmania, at 32%, was well above the average of 22% of 15- to 64-year-olds with up to Grade 10 but not higher qualifications (Australian Bureau of Statistics,

2015b). By inference, in skills policy where equity is measured by participation, Tasmania when compared to other states is an “equity state”.

Tasmania is performing better than the average of other states and territories with reference to key indicators of household consumption, business investment, private investment and public sector spending but sustainability depends on improved education achievements (Eslake, 2016). Eslake argues that Tasmanians must learn more and work more for future improved productivity and prosperity. Of interest to this study is that Deloitte (2011b) argue from the perspective that Australia generally will increase GDP, generate jobs, and stimulate household consumption by targeting the “equity gap” and learners experiencing disadvantage.

The adult learners experiencing disadvantage in this study interact with diverse socialising influences. There is language of low aspiration and mendicancy (Dingle, 2013a; West, 2013) beside vigorous defences in terms of idealism, innovation, and opportunity for the future (Timms, 2013) especially through connection with the natural world (Flanagan, 1996) of the state. Influences may include the gothic history of the state; the dense networks of family and kin (Reynolds, 2012); the divided perspectives of Indigenous people as well as those who came as convicts and those who chose to come as free privileged settlers (Reynolds, 2012); and to purported views that Tasmania is less progressive than other states (Dingle, 2013a). Nonetheless, the influences will include the contention of Schultz and Cica (2013) that significant parts of the national and international community look with intrigue and interest to Tasmania’s natural beauty, culture and food.

The complexity and peaks and lows of traditions and dilemmas are important for understanding socialisation of Tasmanians (Schultz & Cica, 2013) and how this may impinge on policy concerning learners experiencing disadvantage. For the purposes of skills policy and equity, it is worth emphasising Cica’s (2013) view that history in Tasmania continues to be close to the surface and traditions and dilemmas should be viewed through this prism which refracts contemporary life.

## **2.4 Contextual policy**

### **2.4.1 The Context of Equity in Vocational Education and Training (VET) Nationally and in Tasmania**

The context of equity in VET nationally and in Tasmania is discussed as: equity as fairness and social inclusion; governance and public administration; equity: the framework; equity as human rights; the context of paradigms.

Contextual policy is discussed as: the equity gap; equity as fairness and social inclusion; governance and public administration; and, equity: the framework.

## **2.4.2 The Equity Gap in VET**

I examine the equity gap in Australia as: implications of VET FEE-HELP and TVA; and, perspectives of the equity gap.

### ***2.4.2.1 Implications of VET FEE-HELP and TVA***

Consideration of the equity gap is affected by implications for 2016 policy of matters concerning VET FEE-HELP and TVA (NCVER, 2015a). First, VET FEE-HELP has attracted learners experiencing disadvantage to private providers with high-cost, sometimes fraudulent, courses. The learners most likely to access VET FEE-HELP include many considered to be experiencing disadvantage, namely: females; those under 25; those with a disability; those not employed; and external students (NCVER, 2016a, p. 20). NCVER (2015a) draws attention to the fact that while VET FEE-HELP has an equity objective, addressing the scheme to higher-level qualifications has been a “bridge too far” (p. 40) for marginalised students. Learners experiencing disadvantage are over-represented in the data of lowest VET FEE-HELP completions (NCVER, 2015a). Atkinson and Stanwick (2016), in their research of VET FEE-HELP, bear out that the exploitation of learners experiencing disadvantage is largely by unscrupulous private providers in relation to vulnerable learners. NCVER (2015a) reports: “Between 2012 and 2014, the number of providers approved to offer VET FEE-Help doubled, with the number of VET FEE-Help assisted students more than tripling over the same period. Most of this growth has come from the private provider, full-fee-paying market” (p. 14). NCVER (2015a) reports that systems for collection of data are not sufficient to capture a comprehensive picture of the consequences of VET FEE-HELP. Nonetheless, the data that have been captured suggest that the scheme “... may not bode well for future course completions of VET FEE-HELP assisted students” (p. 10).

Second, an overriding matter is that for the first time there are twice as many VET learners than were calculated under all previous analyses based only on public provision. Total VET Activity (TVA) (NCVER, 2016b) makes it clear that the proportion of VET data that is missing is higher than the total reported activity in VET. NCVER (2016b) reports: “As a result, it is difficult to be conclusive about where students live and their disability or indigenous status because of the high proportion of missing data in the total VET data” (p. 21). The TVA data collection has found that “...any comparisons on Indigeneity, disability status or location are inconclusive, despite the provision of VET being widespread across Australia” (p. 6). The question arises with regard to many things and to equity in particular: without information about a skills sector that is now more private than public,

how can we know the nature and extent of the equity gap? Within this 2016 context, I advance the NVEAC (2011) position that the framework for closing the equity gap should include embedding equity in VET, and VET FEE-HELP outcomes and TVA gaps in data imply that this has not been done.

#### ***2.4.2.2 Perspectives of the Equity Gap***

In 2016, Atkinson and Stanwick (2016), bearing in mind the absence of data of student populations among private providers, points to undulating participation rates since 1996 with a general “flat period” following 2012 and an even lower participation rate among 15- to 64-year-olds. Researchers call for governance of equity requiring clarification of the disadvantage definition (e.g. Beddie, 2015). How to define disadvantage has been discussed especially since the Kangan (1974) report and through the re-structuring to a national framework and the market reforms of the 1990s (McLachlan et al., 2013). Buddelmeier and Polidano (2016) point out that neither policy-makers nor VET can be expected to address disadvantage and close the equity gap. In summary, conceptually there are many aspects to what might constitute disadvantage in equity policy and researchers seek more emphasis on support for learners experiencing disadvantage to especially recognise the non-linear paths they take, together with the emerging concerns as to whether private providers have capacity to provide the necessary support (Buddelmeier and Polidano (2016); Beddie (2015); Leung et al., 2014).

Various researchers use qualifying words to describe equity in tertiary education generally. In higher education, Abbott-Chapman (2011) emphasised that worldwide and national participation has grown but she qualified equity as “contingent”. Abbott-Chapman (2011) wrote that “contingent equity” resulted “... from overall increases in higher education participation rather than a genuine redistribution of educational opportunity” (p. 1). Pitman (2015) argued for genuine fairness and inclusion in higher education and that equity outcomes are “proportional”. Bradley et al. (2008) refer to “differential” participation and “lagging” equity (p. 27) in higher education and to lack of parity with enrolments of learners experiencing disadvantage compared with their population numbers in broader society.

There are several ways at looking at what constitutes the equity gap. There are researchers who write that the VET equity gap generally remains (Deloitte Access Economics & NVEAC, 2011b; McVicar & Tabasso, 2016; National VET Equity Advisory Council, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Wheelahan, 2009) despite constant resources poured into policy formulation and into equity programs in education (Beddie, 2015; NCVER, 2014b; NVEAC, 2011). With regard to “second-chance” learners, Lamb, Jackson, Wallstab and Huo (2015) recently found that while some second-chance learners are accessing VET education opportunities, “... data indicates that these are not accessed by some of the

groups most in need ... reducing equity, productivity and social cohesion in Australian society” (p. 92). It is argued that the equity aims are not being met with regard to progress from VET to higher education (Griffin, 2014); VET does better than universities at attracting learners experiencing disadvantage but learners are concentrated in Certificates I and II (Productivity Commission, 2011); VET is not adding to social inclusion (Buddelmeyer & Polidano, 2016); VET may have improved participation but it has not improved opportunities for work for learners experiencing disadvantage (McVicar & Tabasso, 2016); numbers of learners with a disability are increasing but new providers do not have the capacity to cater for them (Beddie, 2015); intergenerational mobility for people experiencing disadvantage is not increasing relative to the general community (Redmond, Wong, Brabury, & Ilan, 2014).

Evidence of an equity gap was also within the review by ACIL Consulting (2015) commissioned by COAG with regard to accessibility and choice. ACIL Consulting (2015) reported early growth with regard to access and choice for learners but later negative results. For the purposes of this study, it has been shown that the equity gap exists from numerous perspectives and that commentators describe its nature in different ways. In this study, I am interested in the equity gap as a matter

### **2.4.3 Equity as Fairness and Social Inclusion**

Equity is defined as fairness and social inclusion (S. Field et al., 2007a; Ministerial Council on Education, 2008) (1.2). I discuss each of these concepts.

The fairness element of equity is subject to law. Central to policy positions in skills development are the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) as well as the anti-discrimination law adopted in each state. In Tasmania, this is the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1998* administered by the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner at Equal Opportunity Tasmania.

The DDA provides protection for people with disability and aims to emphasise the social as well as economic value to all Australians of optimum participation by the widest range of people. The definition (DDA, section 4) for discrimination covers total or partial physical, mental, intellectual and cognitive disability that existed in the past, exists now or may exist in the future. Discrimination may be direct or indirect (DDA, sections 5–6). In the special education section of the DDA (division 2, 22), educational authorities may not limit access to or participation in the benefits of education on the grounds of disability.

Under the Tasmanian *Anti-Discrimination Act 1998*, it is unlawful to discriminate, or treat “less favourably”, based on selected characteristics, or attributes, including race, culture, gender and

disability. Areas of activity (division 3, 22) include education and training (Anti-Discrimination Act 1998 (Tas)). The rights of learners include access to education and how education is delivered. The essential aim is the protection of human rights for people experiencing disadvantage who may be affected, e.g. through funding policy, by an act or consequence of an Australian Government department or agency.

It is demonstrable that the DDA and the Anti-Discrimination Act are central to the human rights of people within social categories, or with characteristics or attributes, who are listed in the Skills Tasmania (2009) *Equity Policy and Action Plan*. It is noteworthy that the human rights law is not comprehensively referenced or cited either in the *National Partnership on Skills Reform* (COAG, 2012b) or the Skills Tasmania (2009) *Equity Policy and Action Plan*. Social inclusion sits alongside fairness as part of human rights but is directly represented as policy.

Social inclusion is part of supranational and international agendas although there is no agreed definition of the concept. The UNESCO (Commission for Social Development, 1995, commitment 4) definition of an inclusive society is:

societies that are stable, safe and just and that are based on the promotion and protection of all human rights, as well as on non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons.

The Australian Government abolished the Australian Social Inclusion Board in 2013. In Tasmania, in the Social Inclusion Unit within Department of Premier and Cabinet (Adams, 2009), inclusion refers to the broader concept of being part of one's community and having opportunity for life, work, volunteering and leisure:

Social inclusion means a fair go at having a decent education, skills, meaningful work, access to services, good relationships and a say on what matters to us. It's about the relationships in life that make us healthy, happy and productive (Adams, 2009, p. 8).

Former Tasmanian Commissioner for Social Inclusion Adams (2009) writes of the national and international infrastructure for the promotion and protection of human rights law (such as the *United Nations Conventions*) "although the extent to which they are comprehensively applied or shape behavioural change is much less clear" (p. 81).

In summary, social inclusion and fairness have meaning in law although the processes for initiating actions are complex.

## 2.4.4 Governance and Public Administration

This section presents what is governed and administered and how it is done. Sub-headings are:

- VET qualifications;
- Policy, legislation and administration including VET skills teaching;
- VET in Tasmania;
- Observations on governance and administration.

### 2.4.4.1 VET Qualifications

VET qualifications are: Certificates I, II, III and IV; Diploma; Advanced Diploma; Vocational Graduate Certificate; and Vocational Graduate Diploma (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013). The qualifications encompass: recognised foundation and core skills; apprenticeships or trade skills (usually three-year courses); and traineeships (one- or two-year courses) (Department of Education and Training, 2016a). It is pertinent to note that learners experiencing disadvantage are over-represented in the lower-level qualifications (McLachlan, Gilfillan, & Gordon, 2013) of VET.

Qualifications are built on competencies to be compatible with workplace requirements for transferring and applying skills in new situations and environments (Productivity Commission, 2011). Young adult learners (20–24 years) experiencing disadvantage are more likely to enrol in Certificate I or II which are courses below the threshold of Year 12 equivalence (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, et al., 2015). In addition, Lamb et al. report that adult learners experiencing disadvantage are much less likely to complete Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) level courses. Completion rates for a Certificate I course are estimated at approximately half of the completion rates for a diploma course.

A primary characteristic of VET qualifications is accredited training that leads to nationally consistent vocational qualifications and credentials. Programs are accredited, or registered, by authorising state or territory bodies respectively. Accredited programs of study include endorsed training package qualifications, nationally and locally accredited courses and nationally and locally accredited skill sets and units of competency (NCVER, 2016b). Training packages are a key feature of VET and comprise standards and qualifications for recognising and assessing people's skills and competencies in a specific industry, industry sector or enterprise (Guthrie, 2009).

The Department of Industry (2014a) reviewed training packages and accredited courses although without reference to training packages as they may relate to learners experiencing disadvantage. The review context was a definition of VET as: "The purpose of VET is to provide Australians with work-ready skills for the labour market – skills that businesses and industries need to be productive and internationally competitive" (p. 6). The review was responding to economy and labour market

changes calling for different skills that are “fit for purpose in the modern economy” (p. 6). While research depicts VET qualifications as having an enabling role for individual and social inclusion (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016), in the review there was no definition of VET as a source of social inclusion and of possibilities for improved equity in the training package review.

#### **2.4.4.2 Policy, Legislation and Administration**

In this section, I describe the infrastructure for policy, legislation and administration with reference to equity, and to VET skills teaching.

A key trend in the skills sector is a more centralised role of the Australian Government with regard to infrastructure, curriculum, research, finances and overarching policy directions (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016). The Department of Education and Training (2016a) promotes VET in terms of industry demand for skills, economic growth and business productivity within a national system that aims to be flexible yet consistent, quality assured and regulated (Bowman & McKenna, 2016). VET seeks to ensure qualifications among learners that will meet present and future industry requirements, instil industry confidence in VET and boost employment outcomes for learners. Australia’s VET system reflects the policy focus on industry demand for skills and is governed by:

- Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Industry and Skills Council which leads and directs the skills sector. The council comprises Australian, state and territory government ministers responsible for industry and skills;
- Australian Industry and Skills Committee (AISC). AISC became operational in 2016 (Department of Education and Training, 2016). AISC is comprised of industry representatives and strengthens industry input to “... prioritise the development and review of training packages based on industry demand for skills, now and into the future ...”;
- Vocational Educational and Training Advisory Board (Department of Education and Training, 2016a) comprising five industry members charged to “... provide advice to the Minister on the development and implementation of high quality and industry-focused vocational education and training ...”;
- Australian Skills Quality Authority (n.d.) oversees the quality and consistency of national standards for VET delivery of skills to industry. In Victoria and Western Australia, the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority and the Training Accreditation Council Western Australia perform these roles; and
- Australia’s National Reform Agenda, successor to National Competition Policy (National Competition Council, 2007) including COAG Skills and Training (COAG, 2016). The reform



agenda focuses on support for Australian business, productivity improvements and increased workforce participation and up-skilling.

The skills sector (Department of Education and Training, 2016a) is administered from the national Department of Education and Training and from the departments considered relevant within each of the eight state and territory governments. Australian and state and territory governments together govern, regulate and support VET. State and territory government ministers, government departments and training authorities consult and work with industry to formulate and deliver VET objectives and strategies for productivity, competitiveness and quality training (Department of Education and Training, 2016a).

Key implementing instruments for national VET objectives include:

- National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform (NPASR) (COAG, 2012b), the COAG agreement between the Australian government and all states and territories, with the objective of achieving: “A VET system that delivers a productive and highly skilled workforce which contributes to Australia’s economic future, and to enable all working age Australians to develop the skills and qualifications needed to participate effectively in the labour market” (p. 5);
- VET FEE-HELP legislation (Higher Education Support Amendment (VET FEE-HELP Reform) Act 2015 (Cth)) which enables loans for higher-level qualifications in VET and with which the Department of Education and Training intends to improve scrutiny of quality of VET providers.
- National Agreement on Skills and Workforce Development (NASWD) (COAG, 2012a).

Together the NPASR and VET FEE-HELP structures and the NASWD legislation aim for national harmonised goals focused on industry demand for skills and privileging (e.g. VET FEE-HELP; NPASR) learners in higher-level qualifications. While the workforce aims are comprehensive it is not straightforward to discern specific objectives or strategies for formulating or implementing governance or policy for equity outcomes. The structures aim for integrated reform with regard to improved accessibility; affordability and depth of skills; participation and qualification completions; responsiveness in training arrangements through competition; strengthened public and private capacity; a strengthened Australian Apprenticeships system; greater transparency for benefit of learners, policy-makers and industry; improved links with tertiary sector, job providers and employers (COAG, 2012b). The evaluation criteria of the NASWD goals are: equity and access; efficiency and effectiveness; and responsiveness (COAG, 2012b). The definitions for equity and access refer to access and participation (COAG, 2012b). People experiencing disadvantage and

people with disabilities are incidentally addressed in the NPASR, as are the objectives of social inclusion and the need for support for learners.

#### **2.4.4.2.1 VET Skills Teaching**

VET is historically and structurally different from other sectors (Karmel, 2010b) and faces some future challenges unique to the skills sector. With medieval historical roots based on apprenticeship and trade models which were master/employer relationships, teaching and instruction has traditionally been a hybrid, or a dual, system of workplace and learning place (Karmel, 2010b). Karmel (2010b) writes that the dual system is a distinctive feature of VET and continues to serve skills and workforce development well. However, issues arise for its adaptation to modern circumstances where industry and requisite skills for training require vision for the present and future workforce needs (Beddie, 2015). VET skills teaching is integral to the vision.

The Productivity Commission (2011) reported that many VET trainers and assessors, possibly up to 40% in the public sector, were not qualified up to Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA) or in equivalent formal teaching qualifications. The commission calculated that in the non-TAFE sector the percentage without these qualifications could be higher.

In 2016, the Department of Education and Training has implemented consultation to consider teacher and training standards with a view to: ensuring the requirements for VET teachers and trainers provide the strongest platform for high-quality assessment; and ensuring those teaching VET skills are highly competent professionals with high-quality, contemporary skills in assessment (Department of Education and Training, 2016b). It is pertinent to note the context of the discussion, which does not draw on notions of higher qualifications for teachers and trainers or 21<sup>st</sup> century changing demands but rather sets out a context where:

An incompetent graduate that is deemed competent could have a negative impact on employers and the workplace or seriously affect public safety, including through endangering individuals or the community. Such flawed qualifications may also have a broader impact on public confidence in nationally recognised training and the reputation of Australia's VET sector (Department of Education and Training, 2016b, p. 4).

The Department of Education and Training has not responded to the Productivity Commission's (2011) concern regarding the high prevalence of staff who have casual or short-term appointments and the implications for quality of learning. Of note for this study is that reform proposals do not appear to take up the concerns of the Productivity Commission or, for example, the research of Clayton, Meyers, Bateman and Bluer (2010) related to learners experiencing disadvantage.

#### **2.4.4.3 VET in Tasmania**

The empirical evidence of this study is drawn from the Tasmanian VET sector. The context includes Australian positions generally but there are matters to which specific attention should be drawn.

VET in Tasmania is legislated under the Tasmanian *Vocational and Education Training Act 1994* (Tas) and the *Training and Workforce Development Act 2013* (Tas). In 2013, the Tasmanian Government created the new identity of TasTAFE (*Training and Workforce Development Act 2013* (Tas)). The object was to establish a system that supports a skilled and productive workforce through vocational education and training (including the traineeship and apprenticeship system), training or skills and workforce development, and foundations skills. The Act also introduced reforms to the *Teachers Registration Act 2000* (Tas) to “... recognise the professionalism and expertise of teachers in the range of areas for which they are qualified ... the Board for registration and the Board will assess which categories of registration have been met” (Government of Tasmania, 2013, p. 16). This means that a registered teacher is a person who is: “... fully registered, provisionally registered or specialist vocational education and training registered” (Part 1, 3). While the Act aimed for quality teaching, the Act is silent on the matter of regulation of teacher registration, a gap which impinges on the concerns about the quality of teaching addressed about TAA40104 within the public sector and perhaps even more so in the private sector.

Tasmania lacks legislative (*Vocational Education and Training Act 1994* (Tas); *Training and Workforce Development Act 2013* (Tas)) clarity about VET’s role with regard to both the labour market and community needs. Simmons (2012) also noted this in a government-commissioned consultancy report. In addition, Simmons pointed out that the Tasmanian Department of Education has no formal policy or purchasing role (unlike most other states). In 2016, this continues to be the case (Skills Tasmania, 2016a). In addition, the *Training and Workforce Development Act 2013* (Tas) does not cross-reference features of equity of the Tasmanian *Vocational and Education Training Act 1994* (Tas). The latter Tasmanian Act implies equity principles by defining a role for VET as including: “... preparation for, or directed to, the enhancement of opportunities to undertake vocational education and training; ... principles of equal opportunity and fairness” (Part 1, 4). Simmons makes the point that the Tasmanian VET legislation “... also leaves no doubt about the fact that VET responds both to the labour market and to the needs of the community as a whole” (p. 33).

From the perspective of equity, the Tasmanian situation is confusing. On the one hand, VET learners in public and private RTOs are recognised in the *Tasmanian Vocational and Education Training Act 1994* (Tas) as having rights of equal opportunity and fairness; learners in TasTAFE, that is the public organisation, do not have such rights implied through the state *Training and Workforce Development*

*Act 2013*. The Simmons report recommended a clearer alignment of VET and TasTAFE legislation objects (Simmons, 2012): “... the lack of clarity about what does and does not constitute VET has also led to misconceptions about where funding is allocated and why...” (p. 33).

In summary, Tasmania’s educational and productivity standards are below the national average (Eslake, 2016) and the state experiences more disadvantage relative to other states. Tasmania’s context for VET is problematic and sits within a national context which is also problematic.

## 2.4.5 Observations on Governance and Administration

I now describe and interpret the way equity is implemented in the key policy positions in the NPASR (National Partnership on Skills Reform) (COAG, 2012b) and the *National VET Regulation (NVR) Standards* (Department of Industry, 2014b). The NVR standards are supplemented with the *Explanatory Statement of Standards for Registered Training Organisations 2015* (Minister for Industry, 2015) and the *Users’ Guide to the Standards* (Australia Skills Quality Authority, 2015).

The primary objective of the NPASR (COAG, 2012b) is to promote productivity and skills to enable all Australians to “develop skills needed to participate effectively in the labour market” (p. 5). In addressing equity, NPASR describes aims as involving:

a responsive, agile and equitable national training system that meets the needs of industry and students (including those from disadvantaged groups or locations) and provides *pathways* into and removes *barriers* between schools; adult and community; vocational and higher education; and employment [*sic*] ... Central to a reformed VET sector, should be the development and implementation of strategies that increase engagement with industry to ensure its needs and requirements are met (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b, p. 2) [my emphasis].

The interpretation of the NPASR leaves unclear what is the definition of disadvantage and appears to support an approach that is based on pathways, barriers and provision of support confined to learners with disability.

The NPASR is silent on the issue that learners with disability have greater protection at law than any other learners experiencing disadvantage. While the NPASR (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b) refers to support for students with disability, this is an area where COAG is bound in any event by the amended *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)*. The NPASR (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b) commits to increasing workforce participation and providing “... the support an

individual experiencing disadvantage or disengagement (including young people) may need to gain skills that lead to employment or other meaningful engagement in society” (p. 2).

The second point is that the standards for national VET regulation (Australian Government, 2012) are unclear about a definition of equity and in any event take a different approach to disadvantage to the NPASR. These standards invoke social categorisation for the purposes of defining disadvantage where the NPASR (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b) proposes a pathways and barriers approach.

The NVR standards refer to equity in terms of social categorisation of learners based on: “age, gender, cultural or ethnic background, disability, sexuality, language skills, literacy or numeracy level, unemployment, imprisonment or remote location ...” (Australian Government, 2012). This is the context of provision for training and assessment standards (standards 1–3), specified obligations to learners and clients (standards 4–6) and RTO governance and administration (standards 7–8).

Further, in the two places where “equity” is used in the NVR standards it is linked so that the concept is “equity and access” (Australian Government, 2012). This is a curious term, especially from the human rights perspective of fairness and inclusion. O’Shea, Lysaght, Roberts and Harwood (2015) point out that providing access is just one part of social inclusion and I contend that social inclusion is just one part of equity. Devlin writes: “access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty phrase” (Devlin, 2013, p. 939).

A significant aspect in defining disadvantage for learners participating in Certificates I and II is that there is less policy focus on targets for improvement than those at Certificate III and beyond (COAG, 2012a; NVEAC, 2011). The *Federation White Paper on Vocational Education and Training* (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014) proposes that learners can be disadvantaged without, at least, Certificate III to enter trade training. On the other hand, some commentators propose that some employment is available below Certificate III skills (NVEAC, 2011). In a staff working paper, the Productivity Commission (McLachlan et al., 2013) introduce the perspective of disadvantage as deep social exclusion and include people with a long-term health condition or disability, people who had Certificate I or II qualifications and unemployed people. In summary, what is disadvantage and who are disadvantaged is conceptually and technically unclear in public policy. In the next section, I locate policy within contextual human rights.

## 2.5 Contextual Human Rights

I did not take a human rights perspective at the outset of this study. The human rights framework, and the title of the study, came late in the analysis of empirical evidence. This section focuses on equity in VET as a matter of human rights in Australia and how to implement human rights into VET governance and policy. In this section, I present: synthesis of human rights and responsibilities in the skills sector; and implementation of equity policy.

### 2.5.1 Synthesis of Human Rights

There is a political, moral, and a legal dimension to the international and domestic covenants which may be cited as related to equity (UN General Assembly, 1966; United Nations, 1948; UNESCO, 1960). Human rights are universal and in education a synthesis of rights will involve (AHRC, 2015a; COAG, 2013; UNESCO, 1960):

- respect for the learner;
- quality of teaching and all aspects of the learning experience;
- equal opportunity;
- appropriate support for learning;
- the right to information about VET and about human rights;
- the duty of policy-makers to address potential as well as existing learners.

Human rights are not absolute; policy-makers may argue a reasonable test, or reasonable adjustment (DDA). However, neither is equity an issue only of access and participation as NVEAC and key governmental policy instruments represent it (e.g. COAG, 2012b; NVEAC, 2011). Human rights generally are defined in different ways. Common elements of a definition of human rights generally are:

- recognition and respect of dignity;
- moral and legal guidelines to protect a recognition of our values;
- basic standards by which we identify and measure inequality and fairness;
- rights associated with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (AHRC, 2015b).

In Australia, the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 (Cth)* limits the human rights definition to rights and freedoms in specific international instruments. Nonetheless, equity is located within a broad framework of rights and this is discussed in the next section.

Australia's national framework for human rights has no human rights Act, unlike all other common law countries (AHRC, 2014). Further, unlike other common law countries, the Australian Government

has signed but not ratified, or entered domestic law, key human rights covenants including the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1976* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966*. These two covenants are often treated separately but in practice any distinction is artificial as each category of rights will depend on each other for existence (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009). There is parliamentary scrutiny of human rights by the *Human Rights (Parliamentary Scrutiny) Act 2011* (Cth). The state of Victoria (*Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*) and the Australian Capital Territory (*Human Rights Act 2004*) introduced their own Acts based on the dialogue, or United Kingdom model, of human rights favouring parliamentary over judicial adjudication.

The Australian Council of Human Rights Authorities (2015a) advocates for human rights education through the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to mainstream human rights education in the national school curriculum (AHRC, 2014). In Australia's *Second Universal Periodic Review*, the AHRC (2015a) welcomed initiatives in human rights education but reported:

There remains a need for ongoing human rights education across the public sector, in the administration of justice and places of detention, within the tertiary and *vocational education sector* and across the community [my emphasis] (p. 5).

The AHRC (2015a) noted that Australia's activities for the World Program for Human Rights Education had been ad hoc and recommended that: "... Government expands its support for human rights education initiatives, including targeted initiatives for public officials" (p. 5).

In Tasmania, the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009) describes accountability limited to state discrimination and Australian Government disability law. It is useful to consider the limits of this position by comparing positions in Victoria and the ACT. The Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* and the ACT *Human Rights Act 2004* afford rights not promoted or protected in other states or territories. Victoria and the ACT afford civil and political rights consistent with the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1976* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966*. These involve specified human rights protecting freedom, respect, equity and dignity. It is unlawful, in the terms of the ACT (2004) position, (section 40B) for a public authority (including entities of a public nature (e.g. private RTOs) to: "(a) act in a way that is incompatible with a human rights; or (b) in making a decision, to fail to give proper consideration to relevant human rights".

A benefit of a human rights Act is that it can anticipate and investigate human rights issues while legislation is in the process of being drafted. The ACT acknowledges that the Act affords more protection by making unlawful those acts that are incompatible with human rights. However, there are barriers preventing actions which involve cost and time involved in a Supreme Court action and the lack of financial compensation to offset costs (Watchirs & Costello, 2015). In discussion of human rights law in Australia, a comparison is often made with New Zealand. In New Zealand, the *Bill of Rights Act 1990* and the *Human Rights Act 1993* together afford rights for which complainants have standing in court and mediation services through the Human Rights Commission (2015).

In this study, I am concerned with equity as a matter of fairness and inclusion and with the obligations on policy-makers to protect and to promote human rights. The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) has come the closest to addressing key elements of equity as fairness and inclusion, contributing to social cohesion, encouraging high expectations and promoting a culture of excellence. Equity and excellence came together in the declaration such that the goal is equality of opportunity together with more equitable outcomes (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). Despite the Melbourne Declaration, the Public Policy Institute (2011) finds that the “concept of equity is poorly defined ... official documents, commentators, researchers and advocates adopt varying concepts of equity” (p. 3).

The AHRC argue that the present human rights framework lacks “building blocks” (2009, p. 3) and that there is an imperative to introduce human rights education in VET (2015). Therefore, what might a policy position for equity in VET embrace? Based on the law and AHRC recommendations, this study proposes that a human rights approach should be accountable in terms of respect and dignity of learners, moral and legal guidelines; basic standards of measurement of inequality and fairness; and rights associated with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (AHRC, 2015b) (p. 51).

## **2.5.2 Observations on Human Rights**

I summarise this section with presentation of Figure 2.1: Synthesis of Human Rights and Responsibilities in the Skills Sector. The synthesis provides the basis for moral and legal guidelines with guidance on how to implement these. Effectively, I suggest that a synthesis of the law and human rights positions provides the theory and praxis (Guy & McCandless, 2012), an integrated package of philosophy and methodology (Keller & Charmaz, 2016), with which to address equity in skills policy. The synthesis (Figure 2.1) is the basis for a report card assessment in Chapter 6 where problematic issues of equity are discussed.



## Synthesis of Human Rights and Responsibilities

### Building Blocks

(Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009a, p. 4)

- parliament, government decision-makers and courts to make human rights central to law, policy and services;
- the right to challenge government decisions which breach human rights;
- education of rights in community and the public sector;
- moral and legal guidelines, and structures, to protect a recognition of our values;
- basic standards by which we identify and measure inequality and fairness;
- rights associated with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (AHRC, 2015a)

**To Protect and Promote** all learners by providing:

- equal opportunity (UNESCO, 1960; *Anti-Discrimination Act 1998* (Tas));
- respect for the learner (COAG, 2013; e.g. UNESCO, 1960);
- quality of teaching and all aspects of the learning experience (COAG, 2013; UNESCO, 1960);
- appropriate support for learning (e.g. COAG, 2013);
- the right to information about VET and about human rights (e.g. AHRC, 2015a);
- the duty of policy-makers to address potential as well as existing learners recognising rights as universal (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009a).

**With Reasonable Steps** to:

- understand learners in a humanistic way;
- constantly inform policy-makers and educators about barriers to learning;
- ensure the same learning experience for all learners;
- conduct and monitor research to constantly inform policy-makers and educators of learners outcomes;
- include all learners in mainstream learning subject only to a reasonable adjustment test;
- provide alternatives for learners unable to take part in mainstream learning;
- ensure all learners know that they have human rights in the learning environment;
- explain to all learners wherever they may be information about learning opportunities;
- ensure all providers are informed, monitored, evaluated, held accountable with regard to human rights obligations (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012, 2015a; Branson, 2009; Marope et al., 2015; Council of Australian Governments, 2013)

**Figure 2.1: Synthesis of Human Rights and Responsibilities in the Skills Sector**

In Figure 2.1, the synthesis of human rights integrates buildings blocks, with duties of policy-makers to protect and promote and the reasonable steps that ought to be taken with respect to equity. I draw on international, national and state law, policy and policy recommendations. As an overview, and especially in the section of Figure 2.1 entitled “to take reasonable steps”, I draw heavily on “Unleashing the potential: Transforming TVET” by Marope, Chakroun and Holmes (2015) with its extensive research across high- and low-income countries. Marope, Chakroun and Holmes (2015) advocate for integrated governance and praxis, for lifelong learning and a human development approach.

I interpret from the stated joint position of the Australian Government and the Australian Human Rights Commission to the public sector through the publication of “Human Rights at your Fingertips” (AHRC, 2012), that there is a moral, political and legal commitment to recognise human rights in VET. I draw also on the *National Disability Strategy* (Council of Australian Governments, 2013) and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)*. The disability discrimination law applies to people with physical and mental disability, but within a human rights context I suggest it is instructive for policy to include a broader group of learners experiencing disadvantage.

With these building blocks and processes, equity in skills policy and delivery perhaps become clearer to address. Clearly, notwithstanding the policy challenges, equity is a matter of human rights. There is a political, moral, and a legal dimension to the international and domestic positions which may be cited as related to equity.

## **2.6 Contextual Research and Literature: Equity as Matter of Human Rights**

Contributions of this study are to address the equity gap in VET, to locate equity in VET in a context of human rights and with a respectful policy approach to the learner. I approach the research and literature as context to these contributions. I scope the equity gap and reflect on neo-liberalism and alternatives to neo-liberalism. I then employ headings to align with the substantive grounded theory (chapter 5) which are: governance, public administration and policy analysis; learning and teaching.

### **2.6.1 The Equity Gap in VET**

I examine the equity gap as: international perspectives on equity; the implications of VET FEE-HELP and TVA in Australia; and perspectives of the equity gap.

### ***2.6.1.1 International Perspectives on Equity***

Lingard and Rawolle (2011) point out that economic and social globalisation has rescaled education research and policy in ways that demand that national policy not be undertaken in isolation of international positions. I set out below some aspects of the international context as they relate to the skills sector in Australia.

International experience shows that there are alternatives to the Australian strategy to address productivity, and equity, which has an industry/demand focus in the skills sector with very limited input from education advisors at a governance or implementation level (Bowman & McKenna, 2016; Simmons, 2012). Kearns (2004) proposes that the alternative lies in focusing on an aspirational “international reform model” (p. 2) which, while noting the different “mandates, memberships and processes” (p. 2) of each country, explores “big-picture” possibilities promoted by international agencies such as the OECD, the European Union, the International Labor Organisation, the World Bank and UNESCO.

Notwithstanding Kearns’s caution to compare countries with like governance, policy and processes, commentators (OECD, Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013; Green et al., 2012; Musset, 2015; 2013a) do make the point that unlike countries with a stark, widening inequality gap such as Australia, the US and the UK (Green et al., 2012), countries that perform well in skills outcomes do define productivity with reference to the right to universal education for all and in terms of demand that is not just industry, but also community and learner demand. It is pertinent that the better performing countries more frequently incorporate into policy analysis methodology that addresses some understanding of the learner experiencing disadvantage (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013).

There is analysis (e.g. Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013; Green et al., 2012; Musset, 2015) of the countries successfully dealing with inequality and productivity that highlight the importance of a skills sector that emphasises industry demand as well as demand that considers community and learners. The present governance and policy tools would not appear to position Australia to explore the international experience in ways that may benefit the development of the skills sector and address the equity gap. I explore equity in Australia in the next sections.

### ***2.6.1.2 Implications of VET FEE-HELP and TVA in Australia***

Consideration of the equity gap is affected by implications for 2016 policy of matters concerning VET FEE-HELP and TVA (NCVER, 2015a). First, VET FEE-HELP has attracted learners experiencing disadvantage to private providers with high-cost, sometimes fraudulent, courses. The learners most likely to access VET FEE-HELP include many considered to be experiencing disadvantage, namely:

females; those under 25; those with a disability; those not employed; and external students (NCVER, 2016a, p. 20). NCVER (2015a) draws attention to the fact that while VET FEE-HELP has an equity objective, addressing the scheme to higher-level qualifications has been a “bridge too far” (p. 40) for marginalised students. Learners experiencing disadvantage are over-represented in the data of lowest VET FEE-HELP completions (NCVER, 2015a). Atkinson and Stanwick (2016), in their research of VET FEE-HELP, bear out that the exploitation of learners experiencing disadvantage is largely by unscrupulous private providers in relation to vulnerable learners. NCVER (2015a) reports: “Between 2012 and 2014, the number of providers approved to offer VET FEE-Help doubled, with the number of VET FEE-Help assisted students more than tripling over the same period. Most of this growth has come from the private provider, full-fee-paying market” (p. 14). NCVER (2015a) reports that systems for collection of data are not sufficient to capture a comprehensive picture of the consequences of VET FEE-HELP. Nonetheless, the data that have been captured suggest that the scheme “... may not bode well for future course completions of VET FEE-HELP assisted students” (p. 10).

Second, an overriding matter is that for the first time there are twice as many VET learners than were calculated under all previous analyses based only on public provision. Total VET Activity (TVA) (NCVER, 2016b) makes it clear that the proportion of VET data that is missing is higher than the total reported activity in VET. NCVER (2016b) reports: “As a result, it is difficult to be conclusive about where students live and their disability or indigenous status because of the high proportion of missing data in the total VET data” (p. 21). The TVA data collection has found that “... any comparisons on Indigeneity, disability status or location are inconclusive, despite the provision of VET being widespread across Australia” (p. 6). The question arises with regard to many things and to equity in particular: without information about a skills sector that is now more private than public, how can we know the nature and extent of the equity gap? Within this 2016 context, I advance the NVEAC (2011) position that the framework for closing the equity gap should include embedding equity in VET, and VET FEE-HELP outcomes and TVA gaps in data imply that this has not been done.

### ***2.6.1.3 Perspectives of the Equity Gap***

Various researchers use qualifying words to describe equity in tertiary education generally. In higher education, Abbott-Chapman (2011) emphasised that worldwide and national participation has grown but she qualified equity as “contingent”. Abbott-Chapman (2011) wrote that “contingent equity” resulted “... from overall increases in higher education participation rather than a genuine redistribution of educational opportunity” (p. 1). Pitman (2015) argued for genuine fairness and inclusion in higher education and that equity outcomes are “proportional”. Bradley et al. (2008) refer to “differential” participation and “lagging” equity (p. 27) in higher education and to lack of parity

with enrolments of learners experiencing disadvantage compared with their population numbers in broader society.

There are many ways of looking at what constitutes the equity gap. There are researchers who write that the VET equity gap generally remains (Deloitte Access Economics & NVEAC, 2011b; McVicar & Tabasso, 2016; National VET Equity Advisory Council, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Wheelahan, 2009) despite constant resources poured into policy formulation and into equity programs in education (Beddie, 2015; NCVER, 2014b; NVEAC, 2011). With regard to “second-chance” learners, Lamb, Jackson, Wallstab and Huo (2015) recently found that while some second-chance learners are accessing VET education opportunities, “... data indicates that these are not accessed by some of the groups most in need ... reducing equity, productivity and social cohesion in Australian society” (p. 92). It is argued that the equity aims are not being met with regard to progress from VET to higher education (Griffin, 2014); VET does better than universities at attracting learners experiencing disadvantage but learners are concentrated in Certificates I and II (Productivity Commission, 2011); VET is not adding to social inclusion (Buddelmeyer & Polidano, 2016); VET may have improved participation but it has not improved opportunities for work for learners experiencing disadvantage (McVicar & Tabasso, 2016); numbers of learners with a disability are increasing but new providers do not have the capacity to cater for them (Beddie, 2015); intergenerational mobility for people experiencing disadvantage is not increasing relative to the general community (Redmond, Wong, Brabury, & Ilan, 2014).

Evidence of an equity gap was also within the review by ACIL Consulting (2015) commissioned by COAG with regard to accessibility and choice. ACIL Consulting (2015) reported early growth with regard to access and choice for learners but later negative results. For the purposes of this study, it has been shown that the equity gap exists from numerous perspectives and that commentators describe its nature in different ways.

### **2.6.2 Neo-liberalism**

In this study, I have preferred to keep neo-liberalism as context to envision alternatives rather than conduct research which may have an unnecessarily polarised perspective of equity in skills policy. Nonetheless, researchers suggest that VET has increasingly become a neo-liberal product with characteristics and language that are managerialistic (Abbott-Chapman & Easthope, 1998; Bowman & McKenna, 2016; Wheelahan, 2015). Neo-liberalism is the term used to conceptualise a system that emphasises economic growth through marketisation and privatisation together with the minimisation of government and the centralising of market principles (Colclough & Manor, 1993;

Peck, 2010; A. Smith, 1776). Neo-liberalism might be interchangeably used with “marketisation” and the market agenda is pervasive in education in Australia and internationally (Connell, 2013a; Savage, Sellar, & Gorur, 2013).

Researchers argue that neo-liberal policy in education “commodifies” learners and situates them in a “deficit discourse” (Armstrong et al., 2016; Miller, 2010; O’Shea et al., 2015; Patrick, 2013; Valencia, 1997) where education becomes skills with commercial value and learners experiencing disadvantage become the blamed victims. This Australian position, Wheelahan argues, is consistent with a neo-liberal, new public management view of TAFE as monopolistic, unresponsive to industry and untrusted to deliver skills outcomes (2015). Wheelahan (2015) infers that the exclusion of provider and consumer input to decision-making translates to exclusion of broader social policy objectives in VET and this is the point of interest for this study. Patrick (2013) takes the argument a step further to propose that key principles of neo-liberalism move beyond the hegemonic to become an apparent objective truth where it is now impossible to argue for values such as, for example, equity.

Discussion of neo-liberalism calls for reflection on an alternative perspective which I next discuss through the lens of paradigms of public administration. A focus on public administration and policy analysis was an unanticipated turn in the study; I had expected that the study might stay confined to, for example, specific aspects of institutions in the skills sector or to the vexed issues arising from VET FEE-HELP.

### ***2.6.2.1 Paradigms of Public Administration***

Paradigms of public administration may be described in different ways but Stoker (2006) argues that their common characteristic is that they are all in transition. Rhodes (1997, 2007) argues that the significant element of the transition is from centralised Westminster-government models to de-centred governance, a term that reflects outsourcing of government services resulting in a network of private and public actors within policy arenas. Historically the three paradigms determining approaches to implementation of public policy objectives are: public administration (around 1900 to 1970); new public management (NPM) (often referred to as the neo-liberal approach); and from 1990s emerging new public governance (NPG) (Osborne, 2010).

Osborne (2010) posits NPG as a new, although not necessarily normative, paradigm by public sector managers and academics but there are a number of models of what NPG might/should look like. Alternative frameworks recognise the changing nature of government and governance but suggest a different focus. These might be “Meta-governance” as the “governance of governance” (Peters,

2010, p. 37); the “hybrid model” (Christensen, 2012) argues that there is “sedimentation” of ideas and practices of the NPM to the post-NPM model of public service delivery; or there is no profound transformation from government to governance (Bell and Hindmoor (2009).

In this study, the focus is on the network governance I saw in the VET field involving how “self-organising interorganisational networks” (Rhodes, 1997, p. 53), such as private and public RTOs, function both with and without government to provide public services. Rhodes, with publications and co-publications from 1997, and Bevir and Rhodes together (e.g. Bevir & Rhodes, 2010; Bevir et al., 2003; Rhodes, 1997, 2007), laid the foundations for consideration of new public governance and it is unusual to find authors in this area of political science and social organisation who do not cite Rhodes as seminal.

Rhodes’s (1997, 2007) interpretation is visible in the formulation and implementation of skills policy with its government funding and diverse actors. First, there is a change of relationships between the state and civil society; there are increased global influences on local decision-making; the polity is increasingly fragmented and differentiated. I saw the “weakened core executive” and a “hollowing out” (Rhodes, 1997, p. 53) of the centralist hierarchical Westminster system where decision-makers have ineffectual, or “loose leverage” (Rhodes, 1997, p. 57) to implement decisions.

Second, Rhodes (2007) argues that policy administration and analysis, or methodology, must change to accommodate the relational aspects of public administrators with the agencies and individuals with whom they must engage to achieve policy outcomes. Rhodes (2007) has argued for the interpretivist model of analysis as counterpoint to positivist approaches. He argues that we cannot “pull off people’s beliefs from their institutional position or their social class” (Rhodes, 2007, p. 1252). It is an important contextual note for this study that there is discussion about the nature of subjective inquiry or interpretivism in governance theory. Rhodes, and later Rhodes and Bevir (Bevir et al., 2003), argue that if it is acknowledged that there is no longer a single, linear reality in public administration, policy analysis and methodology must recognise that ethnography and history are needed to “provide thick descriptions of individual beliefs and practices” (p. 195). Respondents agree (Hay, 2011; McAnulla, 2006) but argue that deeper insights are needed into the nature of institutions (Hay, 2011). Bevir (2011) argues strongly for comparative analysis as a way of focusing less on methodological rigour than on philosophical coherence. It is theorising that led me to consider Rhodes’s interpretive approach in both political science and organisational theory to consider equity in skills policy.

In this study, the framework of NPG is especially pertinent, whether normative or not, for consideration of ways to embed equity in skills policy. That is, the problem solving with regard to closing the equity gap is exercised within a federal structure; programs are funded by a central government authority. However, the implementation of policy is dispersed among subordinate RTOs in government, private and community sectors. The essence of this study is to make visible competing and relational interests, values and cognitive orientations of each to explore how equity might be embedded in skills policy.

### **2.6.2.2 Public Sector Methodology for Gathering Evidence**

There is growing research literature concerning neo-liberal public policy and the ramifications of persisting with traditional methodology for formulating and implementing policy (e.g. Abbott-Chapman & Easthope, 1998; Bevir, 2011; Charmaz, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lingard & Rawolle, 2011; Rhodes, 2007). A former Public Service Commissioner (Briggs, 2007) wrote from the perspective of wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973) – such as equity. Briggs (2007) writes: “The consensus in the literature ... is that such a linear, traditional approach to policy formulation is an inadequate way to work with wicked policy problems” and she is alarmed that “It is often thought that the more complex the problem is, the more important it is to follow this orderly flow” (p. 11).

Academics are raising concerns about concepts of public engagement and public evidence, and social justice, but this research suggests that there is yet to be a conclusive “big conversation” (McAnulla, 2006) about public sector problems and methodology. This is a deep question calling for crossover of sectors and disciplines so that those concerned with policy settings have discourse with what is evidence (or knowledge) and how it can be investigated. Veltri, Lim and Miller (2014) write that the social sciences are consolidating options through qualitative research but that its transfer to support policy is “... still sporadic and in its infancy” (p. 2). This is Denzin’s politics of evidence (2014) and it is fundamentally a philosophical question of what is truth and knowledge and how can it be revealed. I emphasise that considerations of public administration paradigms and policy analysis in government are an alternative way of thinking about neo-liberalism and its impact on equity in VET.

## **2.6.3 Governance, Public Administration, Policy Analysis**

I approach this section through an international perspective and then an Australian perspective.

### **2.6.3.1 International Perspectives**

There are competing ideas of the role of VET as agent for *social inclusion* as well as provider of skills to *industry*. How to address the two roles is debated in high-income and low-income countries



(International Labour Organisation, 2016a; Marope et al., 2015; Ngcwangu, 2015; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016). Marope, Chakroun and Holmes (2015) claim a new 21<sup>st</sup> century objective for VET with a human development emphasis prevailing over economic development to be more inclusive of industry and community, educational and social needs.

The OECD, the World Bank and the International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNEVOC) have embarked on renewed approaches to the role of VET and are emphasising the competing nature, or cultures, of economic growth, sustainability and productivity.

The OECD (2016) emphasises that the global financial crisis, and the legacy of debt and deficit, has meant that how we looked at skills development and equity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is very different to the issues arising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Economic growth is being contested as not sustainable and there are calls for focus on greater social inclusion together with measurements other than through GDP. The OECD (2016) queries: “It is easy to say that in policy planning we need to move away from a narrow focus on growth to a broader notion of well-being and inclusiveness, but how do we go about it?” The OECD is embarking on fresh research and strategies to focus on economic growth that is inclusive.

The World Bank (2012) has reframed the discussion of the push and pull between economic growth, sustainability and inclusion around a key question: “Are greater investments in education and training a prerequisite for employability, or can skills be built through jobs?” (p. 2). The World Bank (2012) also asks: “Skills or jobs—what comes first?” (p. 36). The response is jobs. The World Bank (2012) expressed concerns that training systems may, and do, see disappointing results for hoped-for job outcomes from training investment. However, market distortions can cause poor outcomes as much as shortcomings in education and training systems (World Bank, 2012). Based on this position, the World Bank conceptualised its governance approach to favour jobs and industry demands over broader social justice issues.

The OECD (2014b) is pursuing a job focus and has undertaken to research internationally towards a 2017 report on “Thematic studies: Work-based learning in vocational education and training (VET)”. In “Skills beyond School”, the OECD (2012c) had drawn attention to the common features of VET as decentralised among various ministries, policy arrangements, post-secondary institutions, private and public providers. There is confusion as to the nature of qualifications and what they deliver in community and industry and among learners. Through “Skills beyond School” (OECD, 2012c) together with “Learning for Jobs” (OECD, 2010), the OECD recommends that VET programs be tied to

the needs of the labour market and through this different route has come to similar conclusions to the World Bank.

In 2016, UNEVOC took a different approach to the OECD and the World Bank and announced a stocktake of governance and outcomes with reference to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) (UNEVOC, 2016). UNEVOC (2016) refers, with concern, to the constraints of funding and other resources to skills development and the prevailing emphasis on labour outcomes. The project “Return of Investment of TVET” will research with an international agenda embracing the often conflicting objectives of economic growth, social equity and sustainability. As a basis for the research, UNESCO (Marope et al., 2015) has published “Unleashing the Potential. Transforming Technical and Vocational Education and Training” to explore connections among competing interests in VET. UNESCO sees TVET through the prisms of all three elements of economic, social equity and sustainability rationales but its emphasis is on education through TVET as the key to effective development strategies.

UNESCO emphasise that education, and equity, require governance. At its most basic level, governance rules define who decides on policies, how resources are distributed across society and how governments are held accountable; it involves norms, institutions and rules, and concerns balance of power (UNESCO, 2009, p. 129). Governance is:

an issue not only for central government but also for every level of the system, from the education ministry down to the classroom and community. It is ultimately concerned with the distribution of power in decision-making at all levels (UNESCO, 2009, p. 129).

It is useful to explore the following discussion of the two cultures of VET in Australia, bearing in mind the concepts of governance, of economic growth and productivity, and of social inclusion, in an international context.

### ***2.6.3.2 Australian Perspective***

The Productivity Commission (2012) and Karmel (2010b) contend that governance is defined by how governments address supply and demand in skills policy. Supply-driven policy and funding for course provision are determined by government targets (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b; Hoeckel & et al). Demand-driven policy and funding are usually based on combinations of industry/provider/consumer demand (Karmel, 2010b). In Australia, the Productivity Commission (2012) review of COAG reforms anticipated gains for Australia in moving away from the contemporary regulated and supply-driven system to a demand-driven contestable market. The demand-driven contestable market, the commission argued, would be of advantage to prospective

students and to employers so long as quality was maintained. However, the reform agenda for VET (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014) does not yet suggest change to existing arrangements where skills policy is driven by demand that is dominated by industry interests.

In Australia, skills governance is delivering a persistent equity gap (NCVER, 2014). A key question is what is measured (Griffin, 2016). In 2011 in Australia, the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC), as co-author with Deloitte (2011b), reported on community and individual disadvantage that arises when people are not skilled for work and for social interaction and advocated for measurement of inclusion of learners. Later, Buddelmeyer and Polidano (2016), commissioned by NCVER, argue that economic and social benefits deliver fairness and inclusion and that people experiencing disadvantage are at higher risk of not receiving benefits in this period when skills are increasingly important. Griffin (2016) reports similarly that any lower-level qualifications (Certificates I and II) bring social and personal benefits but measurement needs to be undertaken of consistently low financial returns. Griffin argues it is not possible to measure return on investment in VET until there is understanding between market and non-market benefits (2016). “The challenge will continue to be finding appropriate ways to measure and compare these elements” (Griffin, 2016, p. 29) of market and non-market, Griffin writes, and in this study of equity this is the nub of the issue. Equity cannot be a meaningful governance objective while there is no method for measuring from the perspective of both the market as well as from fairness and inclusion.

The role of VET in Australian research is often seen as one that is, or ought to be, engaging with two cultures (Angus et al., 2013; Ryan, 2011; Wheelahan, 2015). Researchers (L. Angus et al., 2013; Ryan, 2011) propose that, historically, the Kangan report (1974) in Australia represented a culture of skilling as well as broader educational and social ideals; this is discussion of VET’s two cultures as agent for *social inclusion* as well as provider of skills to *industry*. The Australia National Training Agreement (ANTA) from 1992 presided over the next significant policy position after Kangan, and excluded the social role for VET. The ANTA era, Ryan (2011) writes, represented an expanded training market with user choice, competency-based standards and a training board and advisory bodies comprised of industry representatives (although, Ryan notes, in the final stages there was representation of providers). Angus et al. (2013) suggest the present evolved governance is as Kangan had cautioned against, and is VET as predominantly a neo-liberal economic tool with instrumentalist priorities that are directed from the top down.

Karmel (2010b) argues that governance is complicated because VET has a “much more complex relationship with society than other educational sectors” (p. 234). He suggests: “... on occasions it seems that VET is being asked to solve all the problems of the world” (p. 234). Researchers (e.g.

Beddie, 2015; Karmel, 2010b; Ryan, 2011) argue for clearer governance and policy positions with regard to a *reasonable* (Beddie, 2015, p. 27) role of VET to draw out the, at least potential, conflict of the two cultures. Karmel (2010b) proposes that the working definition of VET is that its “core is subprofessional vocational education” (p. 229). In addition, VET is ascribed a role in social inclusion theory as an agent of change for people experiencing disadvantage. Lamb (2011) argues similarly to Karmel that VET has a broad “democratising role” (p. 60).

Ryan (2011) reflects on the complexity of aligning with public administration and policy analysis: of connecting providers and learners in a top-down federal system such as in Australia. He refers to the “loose coupling” (p. 27) of key actors, administrators and specialised professionals, “each with different value systems and agenda” (p. 28) in a system of diverse agencies with differing structures and degrees of autonomy. Ryan (2011) argues that such governance and policy arrangements are very unlikely to filter intended outcomes into classrooms, workplaces and other learning environments without considerable alteration to their integrity. Within these discussions involving the role to socially include learners, Figgis et al. (2007) summed up in 2007, in comprehensive national research that was preoccupied with persistent inequity, in ways that appear to be consistent with contemporary research: “Our reading of the research literature and VET policy, and the input from our informants all suggest that a clear actionable vision is needed to shift the inequities that continue to burden the disadvantaged” (p. 14).

With researchers, practitioners in VET policy argue that more needs to be done to reflect the definition of VET in terms of its role as trainer as well as educator and social inclusion agent for learners experiencing disadvantage (e.g. Angus, Golding, Foley, & Lavender, 2013; Beddie, 2015; Karmel, 2010b). The Productivity Commission (2011) emphasises the diversity of the public skills sector which includes “... schools, polytechnics, universities, community organisations and some government agencies such as the Australian Defence Force” (p. xxx). In the private sector, the Productivity Commission points out that “... small, specialised providers coexist with large, multi-disciplinary colleges and Enterprise Registered Training Organisations (ERTOs)”. RTOs may be funded from a range of sources. The state governments fund technical and further education (TAFE). RTOs may receive or supplement funding from learners, industry or, as in the case of Australian Community Education (ACE), through nominal fees for learners (Productivity Commission, 2011). Goozee (2001) draws attention to the fact that TAFE has become just one part of a very diversified VET system. Definitions can refer to what providers do (i.e. deliver workplace-based, accredited training), or what qualifications are delivered (Productivity Commission, 2011). “VET” encompasses

the flexibility as well as the complexity of the public, private and community enterprise components of the skills sector.

There is more than one possible interpretation of VET. The interpretation remains a matter for governance, policy and legislative definition and clarification (e.g. Angus et al., 2013; Beddie, 2015; Karmel, 2010b). What comprises VET and what its role is, and should be, is contested in Australia where policy focuses on government responsibility to provide technical skills to meet industry demand (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b). Moodie and Wheelahan (2012) draw attention to the fact that Australia is different from European countries in that government takes responsibility for both initial and continuing vocational education. European governments address initial training but continued training is the responsibility of employers (Wheelahan, 2007). Consultant researchers for NCVER (e.g. Beddie, 2015; Karmel, 2010b; Ryan, 2011) argue for an enhanced VET role which would take learners experiencing disadvantage into consideration and include principles of equity such as social inclusion and democratisation (Lamb, Jackson, & Walstab, 2015).

A discussion of governance of skills policy calls for focus on productivity. Productivity is the objective which determines what people learn in VET and how they learn it (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b). The productivity objective potentially judges whether people are contributing citizens or not (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Barton, 2016; Miller, 2010; O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2015; Patrick, 2013; Valencia, 1997). Klugman (1994) points out that measures of productivity vary and what the measures include or exclude will depend on the purpose of the measure and/or data availability. In Australian policy, what is measured is data that focus on productivity for *economic growth* and improved standards of living through *efficiency* and *effectiveness* (McLachlan et al., 2013) [my emphasis]. Green, Toner and Agarwal (2012) write that Australia has relied on the most common productivity measure of labour productivity which is a measure of output per unit of labour input. Green et al. (2012) propose that neoclassical economic doctrine may need to give way to approaches to and definitions of productivity that will include considerations of, for example, business and government leadership and culture.

Governance, public administration and policy analysis for improving equity is revealed to be problematic for several reasons. First, the governance and public administration structures of VET are weighted in favour of industry demand for skills (Department of Education and Training, 2016; Australian Skills Quality Authority, n.d.; Council of Australian Governments, 2012b; Department of Education and Training, 2016a). Learners and providers are excluded and this situation feeds into an equity gap. Second, there is no consistent statement of objectives for equity. Equity often referred to, or implied, in policy in a limited way as access or participation (Council of Australian

Governments, 2012a ). In addition, the population at whom equity may be targeted is not consistently described. For example, the target group can be either people who are disadvantaged (and there is an absence of a definition of disadvantage), or people with a disability (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b). Finally, practitioners and academic commentators seek a reasonable (Beddie, 2015) role for VET to balance the technical and the academic (Moodie & Wheelahan, 2012), the vocational and the socially inclusive (Angus et al., 2013) and lament the absence of objectives for equity.

Drawing on academic research (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Barton, 2016; O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2015), it is difficult to ascribe coherent equity objectives in a VET governance structure where productivity, economic growth and industry demand dominate. I next consider learning and teaching with reference to the equity gap in VET in Australia.

## **2.7 Learning and Teaching**

I introduce this topic by drawing attention that in 2016, the TVA (NCVER, 2016b) shows that there is very limited government data for planning purposes generally and especially for equity and for learners experiencing disadvantage (NCVER, 2016b). TVA (NCVER, 2016b) shows that VET is more privatised and there are more disadvantaged learners than previously understood. This means higher costs and arguably less support (Productivity Commission, 2011) for learners experiencing disadvantage. There can be inference that, in the present VET configuration, government cannot promote an equity vision in a sector beyond its influence (NCVER, 2016b).

I discuss learning and teaching in VET as follows: the productivity context; how equity learners are defined; and, skilling teachers.

### **2.7.1.1 The Productivity Context**

The content of learning through competency training is of concern to researchers especially for its absence in addressing workplaces and societies which are evolving as result of changing technology (Angus et al., 2013; Beddie, 2015; Lamb, Jackson, & Walstab, 2015). The Department of Education review of training packages (Department of Education and Training, 2016b) has not addressed particular self-reported concerns by VET teachers and trainers (Clayton et al., 2010; Productivity Commission, 2011) that they are not equipped to deal with the special needs of learners experiencing disadvantage.

Learners and teachers in classrooms know that productivity is central to how their achievements are defined. Being productive now and, increasingly in the industrial revolution's "new wave"

(Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 2015, p. 8), involves being skilled in ways different to the past. The new economy is disrupted by extraordinary technological change (Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 2015). On the one hand, VET is called upon to train for sophisticated skills (Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 2016) not for the narrowly defined competencies of the past. On the other hand, learners experiencing disadvantage are concentrated in a burgeoning services industry where in some areas less training for skills is required (Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 2015). CEDA (Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 2016) and Beddie, Creaser, Hargreaves and Ong (2014) argue that new leadership is required to take into the workforce new skills from non-traditional workers. These workers are women, migrants and older people who are part of the learners experiencing disadvantage who are central to this study.

Beddie (2014) posits that learners' prospects are constrained within the uncertainty of future skills needs. Some researchers (Lewis, 2008; Richardson & Tan, 2007) argue that the NPASR definition of productivity lacks internal logic because labour force demands cannot be adequately forecast: learners do not know what to learn, and teachers do not know what to teach. Such forecasts, and information about them, are crucial for all learners but especially those experiencing disadvantage who rely on accurate information about work possibilities. Richardson and Tan (2007) propose an alternative to contemporary strategy, emphasising industry demand such that there is focus on what people want to study, rather than on what future employers are anticipated to need.

Learning might be made to be broader, and defined from two perspectives. First, the definition of productivity as encompassing skills for the workforce only is argued to be narrow because it leaves out the evidence of the potential to grow GDP through the not-for-profit or volunteering sector (Volunteering Australia, 2009). Second, workforce diversity as an enabler of productivity is invisible as a significant factor to close the equity gap (Triggs, 2015; Deloitte Access Economics & NVEAC, 2011b). Deloitte (2011b) put the business case for diversity, arguing that the objective is not just diversity of characteristics, e.g. of gender, or demographics of people experiencing disadvantage. Deloitte (2011b) argue that all learners' diversity of thought enhances productivity in business. An example of evidence is research (Herring, 2009) demonstrating that organisations with racial and gender diversity increased productivity and sales revenues, numbers of customers and market share. There is a business case, or economic argument for a human rights and diversity approach in the skills sector; closing the equity gap can be argued to economically benefit employers as well as learners experiencing disadvantage.

Teaching and training in VET is challenging and those who undertake these tasks self-report that their training is not adequate. Teachers reported that they were not confident that they had been taught to engage with learners who experienced disadvantage. Halliday, Wynes and Misko (2013) reported similarly that present training was “risky” despite new quality assurance reforms; competencies assessment was too flexible and open to discretion and not sufficiently rigorous. Researchers (Beddie, 2015; Clayton et al., 2010; Halliday et al., 2013) considered their findings to be alarming. They recommended serious and urgent attention be paid to improving VET training qualifications and, as a necessary adjunct, to commitment to the professional development of the VET workforce (Beddie, 2015). The Productivity Commission (2011) wrote of reports that the growth of private VET expansion had been “at the cost of a loss in quality” (p. xlv) in teaching and training especially in community services. The Commission (2011) added that there are no unequivocal indicators for VET, so any convincing calculation is elusive.

### **2.7.1.2 How are Equity Learners Defined?**

The NPASR (COAG, 2012b) and the *National VET Regulation (NVR) Standards* (Australian Government, 2012) implement equity policy through barriers analysis as well as social categorisation. In addition, in the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009), while social-economic status and regional residence are referred to, the target groups for equity funding are defined in terms of social categorisation. I discuss barriers analysis and social categorisation analysis below. I also contribute to research in this area by introducing alternative concept of learner disposition analysis.

Barriers (and social categorisation) are referred to in the NPASR as a way of looking at disadvantage. Pocock, Skinner, McMahon and Pritchard (2011) argue that barriers about learners experiencing disadvantage tend to be ad hoc and are not conceptually conceived. Pocock et al. (2011) argue that barriers are misunderstood and complex: they are personal, situation based, institutional, related to economic and cultural background, and more. NVEAC (2011) pressed for fundamental reform in VET equity policy on the basis that barriers “... do not adequately take account of [disadvantaged learners’] particular life circumstances” (p. 2). NVEAC (2011) also examined barriers in terms of transitions for learners experiencing disadvantage and report that “There is little in the literature that provides student perspectives ...” (p. 4); there is “next to nothing” (p. 24) in the literature and much more needs to be done to understand constraints to participation and progress in skills development.

Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) describe barriers to learning as either individually based or structural. These researchers posit that individually based barriers are agentic and address a learner’s personal resources. The structural barriers refer to the impact on the learner of relationships



between state, family and work, and the state and work. Institutional barriers are clearly structural. Situational barriers, although arising from family or job, are regarded as subject to structural conditions. Information and liquidity barriers can be both individual and structural (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013) and provide a context for how learners experiencing disadvantage may be considered in skills development for the purposes of policy implementation. Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) represent the barriers to show the situations which can be obstacles to learners at a given time. The institutional barriers can be a source of discouragement to prevent participation. The information and liquidity barriers are the bases on which learners may imagine and realise their potential. Barriers analysis deals with learners' circumstances and in the Tasmanian *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009) barriers include socio-economic status as well as whether a learner lives in a regional area. In the NVR standards (Australian Government, 2012) and the Tasmanian *Equity Policy and Action Plan*, barriers analysis is absent and disadvantage is presumed based on how a learner is socially categorised. My interpretation, based on policy and academic research, is that barriers analysis as it is proposed in Australian policy lacks conceptualisation and, in any event, does not accommodate equity as a matter of human rights.

Social categorisation sits alongside barriers analysis as a way of defining learners. In Australia, *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment, 1990) laid out social categorisations for the policy purpose of identifying which groups may be under-represented in higher education and for suggesting evaluation processes. The aim was to advance a social justice agenda which was attached to objectives, targets and strategies for learners experiencing disadvantage (Department of Employment, 1990). The social categorisations transferred to implementation of public policy separately from their context, which called for local understanding of who were the people who were disadvantaged (Department of Employment, 1990). It was intended that equity objectives, plans and targets would be set with those people in mind. Nonetheless, the government document aimed to specifically emphasise that "... the affixing of 'labels' will not be helpful, and it is not the Government's intention that this should occur" (Department of Employment, 1990, p. 5). However, social categorisation, of labelling, is a tool for both policy formulation (e.g. Council of Australian Governments, 2012b) and for implementation (Britton, 2007).

A key contention of social scientists is that social categorisation involves a value judgement by the policy-maker and may reinforce polarising notions of the people populating the categories as the "other", in a "deficit" or "commodified" manner, and of problematising particular population groups (Britton, 2007, p. 62; O'Shea et al., 2015). Policy-makers usually initiate social categorisation based on culture, physical or mental disability, engagement with criminal justice system, race, gender or

age (Britton, 2007; Charmaz, 2014). The Australian NVR standards (Australian Government, 2012) socially categorise in this way. The social categorisations sourced from the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2013) are based on the NVR standards. In Tasmanian policy, criminal justice is an additional category. The social categories are referred to as the targeted groups for policy purposes and are: race; culture; disability; mental illness; experience with the criminal justice system; gender; age. In Tasmania (Skills Tasmania, 2009), this translates to: “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; people with a disability; people with mental health issues; migrants and humanitarian entrants; prisoners and offenders; women; people over forty-five years of age” (p. 3).

In Tasmania, the criteria set for funding applications require RTOs competing for funding to address one or a number of social categories in designing equity programs (Skills Tasmania, 2009). The performance measurements of the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* include measuring and improving participation rates as a proportion of the target group population aged 15–64 as well as past rates, level of attainment, further study and employment outcomes and satisfaction with the course that is undertaken. Notwithstanding the original government preferences to not affix labels (Department of Employment, 1990), and social science concern about “othering” (Britton, 2007), the strategy of using socially categorised target groups is used in policy in Tasmania.

In summary, implementation of equity policy in Australia is usually based on social categorisation and/or barriers analysis. These concepts are arguably inconsistent with human rights principles of respect for learners (Figure 2.1) because the first is seen to commodify people (Britton, 2007; O’Shea et al., 2015) and the second is conceptually unsound (Pocock et al., 2011). There is an alternative, or at least complementary, option in learner disposition analysis in policy in OECD countries (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013) that is arguably more consistent with respect of human rights of learners experiencing disadvantage.

Several OECD countries rely on learner disposition as an alternative or an adjunct to other policy analysis, e.g. social categorisation, or barriers analysis (Desjardins and Rubenson, 2013). Further, learner disposition is of interest as a concept of policy which may respect human and individual needs of learners experiencing disadvantage in ways consistent with human rights. In education, the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2013) sets criteria for teachers to develop learners’ personal and social capabilities rather than learner disposition. The key organising criteria for capabilities are: self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; social management. In the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (2011), while the term “learner disposition” is not used, the standards do call for specific pedagogic attention to the individual needs and outcomes of learners and that is the concept of interest to this study.

There appears to be emerging interest in learner disposition (Beddie, 2015) but lack of academic research that focuses on adults or “second-chance” learners. Figgis et al. (2007, p. 15) argue for an approach to all learners which, unlike social categorisation and barriers analysis, may have a lesser tendency to over-simplify and homogenise disadvantage. Some illumination of the use of language within research with regard to children and young adolescents (10- to 14-year-olds) may be helpful for defining learner disposition as a matter for policy. Lamb et al. (2015) report that research with 15-year-olds suggests supporting disposition, or “development of academic mindsets” (p. 61). Lamb et al.’s (2015) interpretation is that student perseverance, and grit, will depend on whether the learner sees the effort as possibly rewarding and that they have capability to achieve. Lamb et al (2015) write “students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as low SES and indigenous students, and those living in non-metropolitan areas, are less likely to feel this way” (p. 63). Avis (2004) reflects on disposition in education policy positions as related to motivation to labour; this interpretation is central to the “learning to labour” concept in England.

Brockmann (2016) undertook VET analysis in England that approaches learner disposition in terms of individual identities because it provided a way to tease out important differences in learners experiencing the “academic-vocational” divide with the objective of enhancing apprenticeship policy. Farrington et al. (2012, figure 9.1), from the University of Chicago, undertook a comprehensive literature analysis which included exploration of how disposition findings affected equity gaps. The research is preliminary and provisional but Farrington et al. found that only an academic mindset appeared to reduce gender and racial/ethnic gaps although this will depend on other stereotype, or social categorisation, threat or other forces that differentially harm minority students in the first place. For the purposes of this study, the research of Farrington et al. (2012) tentatively suggests that the social category from which people come does not relate to academic performance. Of interest to this study is that in research involving children and adolescents, opportunities are arising to situate interpretation of learning disadvantage into policy, with reference to broad considerations of cultivation of academic mindsets together with learner identity.

Field (2012) proposes that learner disposition, or the learning self, can only be understood with reference to *habitus* or the social reality that tends to engender particular dispositions. Farrington et al. (2012) suggest similarly that what is missing is how to leverage non-cognitive factors to transform educational practice into policy. The focus for leverage in this study is on non-cognitive matters of structure and socialisation, on *habitus* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), on “traditions and dilemmas” (Rhodes, 1997) and subjective learner identity (Brockmann & Laurie, 2016). In this study, learner disposition is defined with reference to French sociologist Bourdieu who originated the term

(Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and to educational policy analyst, Field (2012). Learner disposition (Bourdieu, 2010) is the necessary internalisation of *habitus* that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions. It is beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt. Bourdieu (1990) was interested in persistent structural inequalities and how subjective individual experiences were a part of these. Field (2012) refers to “the variety of enduring orientations and forms of ‘know-how’ that people pick up from their social experiences and everyday lives” (p. 8). Field (2012) advocates increased research into learner disposition as a policy instrument for promoting equity outcomes rather than only addressing structural or situational barriers.

In Australia, Karmel and Lim (2013) describe the difficulty of reliably assessing barriers in terms of socio-economic status, proposing that a deeper understanding of the individual is necessary. Beddie (2015, p. 19) uses the language of learner disposition, with a focus on “aspiration”, to argue that new ways should be explored to understand disadvantage. This, she argues, is more than definition and measurement of disadvantage (Beddie, 2015). Learner disposition involves the inclination to learn and gathers together social, historical and cultural aspects that may help policy-makers to situate learners within broader learning environments.

In Australia, NVEAC (2011) has argued strongly for reform efforts in policy formulation and implementation in equity and skills development that go beyond group disadvantage and “... allow for specific individual needs” (p. 6). International and national literature commonly explores ways that are alternative to social categorisations analysis and seeks a perspective of learners experiencing disadvantage that focus on learning, or learning disposition (Broek & Hake, 2012; Farrington et al., 2012; J. Field, 2012; S. Field et al., 2007a; Figgis et al., 2007). The countries with policy positions that address dispositional issues among learners experiencing disadvantage are generally those that also show improved levels of increased participation and income equality (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013). In an analysis of institutional, job-related, family-related and dispositional barriers across 33 countries, Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) bring evidence that situational barriers appear to be the easiest to deal with but that “In almost all instances, dispositional barriers are the most difficult to overcome” (p. 276).

Other approaches to implementation are tied to definitions of equity. There are propositions across political, public sector and academic research that traditional methods for implementing equity in skills policy require fundamental reform (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014; Figgis et al., 2007; NVEAC, 2011; OECD, 2012a; Productivity Commission, 2012; Ryan, 2011). Figgis et al. (2007) argue that policy approaches based on either special equity or diversity management have not proved successful.

It is argued that disadvantage of itself, as distinct from learners' capability, may be the primary constraint for improved VET participation (McVicar & Tabasso, 2016) while at the same time targeting aspects of disadvantage is problematic (e.g. Beddie, 2015). There is considerable literature about the need to target support for learners experiencing disadvantage, the focus of focus may be the key to effectively improving outcomes (Griffin, 2014; Leung et al., 2014; McVicar & Tabasso, 2016). Examination of this literature is beyond the scope of this study. However, the thrust of this study is towards equity as fairness and inclusion and as a matter of human rights which draws attention to the right of learners experiencing disadvantage to be supported (UNESCO, 1960).

## **2.8 Contextual Observations: Skills Policy and Equity as a Matter of Human Rights**

In this study I am mindful of the interconnectedness of philosophy and praxis and take the position that a human rights framework guides understanding of philosophy and also delivers praxis for realisation of equity (Guy & McCandless, 2012); the approach does nonetheless provide a way to look at legal as well as cultural issues of equity, of fairness and inclusion, with regard to the governance and administration of equity in VET (Alvez & Timney, 2008; Hoeckel et al., 2008; McGrath, 2012; McSherry, 2013).

When I was two years into this study, the Australian Human Rights Commission (2015a) made specific recommendations for the inclusion of human rights education and human rights dissemination of information in VET and in public administration generally. The espoused position of the Australian Government recognises that "human rights matter. They are about a fair go ..." (Attorney-General's Department, 2010). It follows that if the term "equity" is to be used in public administration then reference must be made also to human rights. A human rights approach presents its challenges but does suggest a way of placing equal value on equity as an objective in policy to balance and integrate into the objectives of workforce development.

I have provided context to the intellectual puzzle and the substantive grounded theory of this study. I have pointed to specific contributions of this study as: proposing a way of introducing learner disposition to VET policy; viewing neo-liberalism from the perspective of new public governance; synthesising multiple strands of human rights that are relevant to VET.

## **2.9 Chapter Summary**

This chapter presents a problematic context to VET nationally and in Tasmania together with analysis of key concepts for consideration in policy.

The next chapter (Chapter 3) presents the methodology of the study and makes the case for philosophical and methodological consistency as well as eclecticism in approach. I discuss the intellectual puzzle and the research design which culminated in the substantive grounded theory and moved towards a formal theory.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

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## 3.1 Introduction

The methodology of constructivist grounded theory (conGT) self-selected for this study because equity in skills policy is a longstanding, seemingly intractable problem needing a fresh approach (Briggs, 2007). ConGT does more than provide a fresh approach (Denzin, 2014; Preissle, 2014); it up-ends philosophy in research, and therefore traditional methodology and methods, because it aims to put aside the “objectivist cloak” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 321). ConGT does not seek truth that is objectivist but recognises multiple realities, is subjective and co-constructed, and not value-free (Charmaz, 2014).

This is the methodology of conGT and despite presenting an alternative “second generation” (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014, p. 8) philosophical position, it is also inextricably linked with the methods of classic grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Classic grounded theory was counterpoint to the prevailing “grand theory”, descriptive (Charmaz, 2014, p. 8) hypothetico-deductive approach which Thornberg (2012) viewed as “aping” (p. 2) quantitative research. This study generates theory by induction and theorising from empirical evidence. The process and the product of this study are grounded in empirical evidence with development of the researcher’s theoretical sensitivity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014) to develop concepts and theory. The way this is done is the subject of this and the following chapter.

In this chapter, I discuss aspects of the methodology which are:

- representation of methodology;
- intellectual puzzle and research questions;
- philosophical positions;
- research paradigm;
- research methodology;
- theoretical perspectives;
- research strategies;
- methodological considerations and choices for this study.

## 3.2 Representation of Methodology

Representation of qualitative research requires reflexivity, Darawesh (2014) argues, to promote rigour and reliability. Because the methodology is new and emerging, except for Chapter 7, I have included a reflexive “representation of ...” section. Classic grounded theory (CGT) generally and constructivist grounded theory (conGT) specifically can be a difficult choice of methodology (Hunter et al., 2011; Nagel et al., 2015; Wu & Beaunae, 2012) because they are not explained in detail. To explain the study means to tease out philosophical, historical and evolutionary patterns (Nagel et al., 2015). This is especially so for this study where CGT and conGT were historically formed and used in health and nursing, and emergence into policy is very new (Keller & Charmaz, 2016).

While Charmaz (2014) describes constructivist grounded theory as a theory methods package, I found that while analysing evidence it became necessary to reflect on the extent to which constructivism is consistent with classic grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967). On the one hand, I learned from conGT that, whether I realise it or not, I will represent methodology in my research in ways that reflect my background and that I must learn to be reflexive about this. On the other hand, while aiming to analyse conceptually, I recognised Glaser’s (2002) concern that there is a fine line to traverse such that the philosophising of conGT may allow one to transgress into descriptive, forced analysis. Glaser (2002) argued that “constructivism” is a misnomer unnecessary for grounded theory; that grounded theory drives abstract theorising through constant comparison and theoretical sensitivity. Ultimately my position was that conGT exposes the subjectivity of research and for this study that aims to speak to policy-makers, this is a desirable strategy.

For the purposes of methodology, it is key to analysis that I am reflexive about my education and professional experience as context to my research. I have a law degree which some researchers argue comes from an essentially positivist tradition. I may have an “inner positivist” but it is also true that I never intended to practice in the law because I was more concerned with what the law “ought” to be especially in policy; my inclination is towards critical inquiry. My thought style with this research is to try to speak to government with symbols and language that will be acceptable to policy-makers. This I view as an essential ingredient for rigour in 21<sup>st</sup> century social justice research.

As described in Chapter 1, conGT, itself an emerging methodology, is concurrently emerging into social justice research (Charmaz, 2013, 2014) which is at the centre of this study. The flexibility of conGT is rewarding but involves a “myriad of paths and landscapes” (Nagel et al., 2015, p. 366) and a burden of extra scholarship for researchers who use it. It is intrinsic to credible theorising that I should be reflexive (Charmaz, 2014) about the subjectivity and the myriad paths. I am reflexive about



methodology to cast light on its newness, the subjectivity of this study and to exemplify how conGT may be relevant to policy-makers dealing with skills policy and equity as a matter of human rights.

### 3.3 The Intellectual Puzzle and Research Questions

Methodology and methods flow from the *developmental intellectual puzzle* (Mason, 2012) and the “central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2014, p. 214) together with the primary research questions (). I invoked Charmaz (2014), Mason (2012) and Crotty (1998) in terms of an intellectual puzzle as a foundation to the research design. Crotty’s fundamental position is that the puzzle approach allows for the flexibility of not assuming there is a solution to the central phenomenon. Charmaz and Mason provide three other reasons. First, the intellectual puzzle gives the advantage of being able to “conjure entire new puzzles *while we gather data* [Charmaz’s emphasis]” (2014, p. 25). Second, the intellectual puzzle helps to analyse what is the “essence” (Mason, 2012, p. 13) of the qualitative study. Finally, Mason requires the intellectual puzzle to be: “... a *relational* process, in which the researcher is continually thinking about and engaging with those to whom the argument is being made” (Mason, 2012, p. 173) (my emphasis). It is this relational process that is especially significant to the methodology of this study. In this study, the relationship process involves micro, meso and macro inquiry, i.e. inquiry that allows one to explore the relationships of individuals within broader organisational environments.

The puzzle in this study is primarily developmental in Mason’s terms (2012) as it seeks to understand *how* certain processes – in this case in equity policy and skills development – occur and why. This approach recognises that at the end of the study, there can be increased understanding but also much may remain puzzling and unpredictable. The intellectual puzzle reflects the background (Chapters 1 and 2) of skills development and reform in vocational education and training together with issues of equity and asks:

How might equity be embedded into skills policy?

The research questions evolved to: how is equity defined and implemented in skills policy; how might learner disposition inform equity objectives in skills policy; what should be the key features of the governance of equity in skills policy?

### 3.4 Philosophical Positions

This section investigates the philosophy of the paradigm of this research. An enlightening observation for me was that understanding our personal philosophy is very important. This is

because from that point we, and others, know what drives views of how knowledge can be legitimately acquired (Mills & Birks, 2015). Nagel, Burns, Tilley and Aubin (Nagel et al., 2015) found exploration of their own philosophical positions an unexpected and essential part of their use of conGT, as did I. In this way, I know that my position is that legitimate acquisition of knowledge is subjective and I am not a *tabula rasa*; none of my research participants is a *tabula rasa* (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The thread of the concept of the *tabula rasa* begins with the philosophical and recurs through methodology and method. How we subjectively shape our professional and personal experiences, what we read and how we interpret it, will determine what we say and do (Charmaz, 2014). Philosophical clarity, together with consistency with methodology and methods, is important in conGT where there is a conscious shift away from objectivism at the other end of the spectrum of subjective research (Charmaz, 2014). “I am not a *tabula rasa*” allows that it is not possible for me, or my research participants, to propose an objective truth because our interpretation connects with our own subjective experience. The research I present here is product of this researcher and these participants; it is just one part of many possible realities.

It is increasingly advocated in qualitative research to embed philosophical foundations into research design (Clarke, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Mason, 2012; O’Leary, 2014). Philosophical positions for research are located in social science and in this discipline, why and how we produce knowledge and do research is increasingly “questioned, critiqued and even denigrated” (O’Leary, 2014, p. 4). Mason argues strongly for researchers to establish their position or risk “vagueness” or “imprecision” (Mason, 2012, pp. 14–16) in the methodological approach. Clarke argues that “epistemology/ontology constitutes the bedrock, the foundation of a method ...” (2005, p. 301). Where our philosophical positions – or belief system, or worldviews as others prefer to approach it (Creswell, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 2014) – fit on the positivist/interpretivist spectrum is the point from which methodology and methods flow (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2013). Where the scientific paradigm – the search for an objective truth – previously prevailed, there are now numerous ways of exploring social phenomena through multiple truths or realities, that can be “participative, collaborative, inductive, idiographic, and exploratory” (O’Leary, 2014, p. 4). Whether knowledge is objective, knowable and measurable, or “ambiguous, fluid and relative” (O’Leary, 2014, p. 5) will influence the choice of methods in research whether researchers are conscious of their impact.

What we value and therefore believe worthy of research, what we see as knowledge and how we represent it form the bases of axiology, ontology and epistemology respectively. Each of these philosophical positions is discussed below as they relate to this study.

### 3.4.1 Axiology

Axiology is surprisingly neglected in many qualitative research studies (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Hart (1971) suggests that axiology precedes ontology and epistemology. Axiology – mainly a 20th century product – engages the basic question: what is it that we value that causes us to research? (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Axiology makes visible our “basic beliefs” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Visibility of basic beliefs is important to the reader and to the researcher who should contextualise inquiry into how his or her own beliefs are affecting research and analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

What I value and which has caused me to research is fairness, and my framework is moral as well as legal fairness. Nagel, Burns, Tilley and Aubin (Nagel et al., 2015) guided me well in philosophical matters and emphasised the importance of philosophical understanding but it was surprising to me that they left out axiological positions. Exposure to considerations of axiology helped me to understand that my approach to fairness may be considered transformative (Creswell, 2014) which would lead me into areas which positivist and post-positivist researchers might question as unacceptable advocacy or calls to action because these are inappropriate to objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Constantly referencing axiology (though reflexivity) drove the necessary testing of my own preconceptions (Charmaz, 2014) about what participants were saying and doing, and what this meant for the research.

The role of axiology, Guba and Lincoln (2005) contend, in critical theorism is a “means to social emancipation” and in constructivism it is of intrinsic value. I related to the constructivist and I came to comprehend that in my research my own axiology is intrinsic – it is not merely the means but is essential to the aims. Creswell sees the properties of constructivism as “political, power and justice oriented, collaborative, change-oriented” (p. 6). The axiological position of Charmaz (2013) takes this further and is styled within social justice studies which are “looking at both realities and ideals” (p. 510). Mertens, Sullivan and Stace (2013) describe the necessity for researchers of fairness and social justice to heighten awareness of diversity, cultural competency, and capacity to focus on their own limitations and biases. This approach acknowledges subjectivity, that there are multiple realities and differential access to power that influences those realities. This approach calls for methodology and methods that are not “silently authored” (Griffiths & McKenna, 2013, p. 7).

All these axiological considerations are intrinsic to this study which is concerned with human rights within skills policy. These basic beliefs determined “... how choices are made with respect to the problem, paradigm, theory,, gathering and analysis of evidence, context” (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 197).

### 3.4.2 Ontology

Ontology involves the nature of being, reality and truth (Chamberlain-Salaun, Mills, & Usher, 2013). It is also the study of how things "... are understood and categorized" (O'Leary, 2014, p. 5). With my axiology of moral and legal fairness, my ontology is founded on ideas of law but my preoccupation with social justice predisposes me to seek humanist, multiple realities. Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) propose that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, researchers generally are letting go of the concept of all truth being objectivist but there still lingers the idea that some single-reality may be possible. Researchers acquire new methodology to continue to challenge concepts of truth, recognising that events and experiences are made real because our own (subjective) senses mediate them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a). What ontology does, Mason argues, is to cause us to look closely at the nature of the phenomena, or entities, or social reality to be investigated (2012) because we want to think about how to categorise them. How we categorise may be located in many different sources, for example, in people, bodies, practices, discourses, in social, legal or administrative structures (2012). This study has been ongoing self-knowledge about how I contextualise reality with reference to the idea of law.

Ontologically, theory may engage differently with positivism and interpretivism which is foundational to conGT. Positivism is a position of realism (Scotland, 2012) which engages the "march of science" (Crotty, 1998, p. 18), assumes an objective reality and discovers theory that seeks causes, looks for explanations, and emphasises generality and universality (Charmaz, 2014). Positivism values concepts of internal validity based on an independent variable and external validity based on replicable data (Scotland, 2012). Interpretivism, or relativism, can be a vexed agent in both qualitative research generally and in classic grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). In qualitative research, interpretivism may be denigrated as not empirical, or inaccurate or invalid, because it lacks a foundational basis or is too contextual (Scotland, 2012). In classic grounded theory, interpretivism may be rejected as undermining the analytic and developmental power of abstraction through constant comparison (Glaser, 2002). Nonetheless, interpretivism engages primarily with human beings and their actions (Crotty, 1998), assumes multiple realities and aims at abstract understanding of meaning and action, and people's construction of meaning (Charmaz, 2014). It follows that positivism and interpretivism will act in different ways. Positivism will seek to "systematize knowledge", "separate fact and value" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 228) and involve the language of verification, value free concepts and concepts as variables. Interpretivism is an "imaginative process" and will acknowledge "indeterminacy", truth that can only be "provisional" and life that is continuing process (Charmaz, 2014, p. 231).

Because of ontological analysis and with reference to Guba and Lincoln, (2005) I learned that I cannot see reality as absolutist; rather, for me, what is real is what my study participants and together with other sources of evidence tell me is “real” at a particular time, and in this way I have a constructivist, and perhaps transformative, approach. Further, I ontologically engage the critical paradigm (Crotty, 1998) where no knowledge is value-free and where, as I previously commented, axiology guides me with its questions of what is intrinsically worthwhile in areas of social justice, values and assumptions (Scotland, 2012). There are two key matters that I learned from Guba and Lincoln throughout this study. First, I look at reality with reference to its usefulness and meaning for action and further steps. This is a heuristic approach which Richards and Farrokhnia (2016) target as an important aspect of utilising conGT in policy because policy should seek further steps. While recognising the hazards (Sunstein, 1994) as a trap to introduce bias, I do consciously apply a heuristic approach in this study. This engages judgement or problem-solving with reference to the logic of probability and of intuitive reasoning (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982). Key concepts of heurism in the seminal (Sunstein, 1994) text of Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky (Kahn 1982) in decision-making cognition are: availability; anchoring; and representativeness of values and evidence (Bottom, 2004). Each of these go to problem-solving (Sunstein, 1994) and in this study the availability of empirical evidence from a diverse group of participants, how to anchor or ground it, and how to represent both values and evidence were central to the study. Second, reality is the meaning-making of participants and it is only when it is understood how these may be faulty that they can be changed. For example, Guba et al. (2005) make a point of writing that meaning-making of policy-makers that leads to inequity can only be understood with how it is inequitable, i.e. when it is found to be discriminatory (p. 237). This focus is especially pertinent in this human rights approach to public policy where I try to understand equity in terms of its adverse consequences for learners experiencing disadvantage.

### **3.4.3 Epistemology**

Epistemology involves “rules for knowing” (O’Leary, 2014, p. 5) and will be either objectivist or constructivist (Crotty, 1998). With specific reference to research, Mason’s (2012) practical definition of epistemology is: “What might represent knowledge or evidence of the entities or social “reality” that I wish to investigate?” (p. 16). Crotty (1998, p. 6) defines objectivism in terms of where meaningful things can exist quite independently of our consciousness and experience and which can be discovered by scientific research. On the other hand, constructivism is cast in terms of where truth and reality exist only in relation to our engagement with the realities that we see in our world; reality is not independent (Crotty, 1998). In conGT, the epistemological position is that reality is “multiple, processual and constructed” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). Constructivism self-selects as

epistemology given the axiological and ontological positions of this study. Crotty suggests this is evidenced in the articulation of a “puzzle” which enquires whether there is any way to make meaning (1998) of what would appear to be multiple truths (1998). This approach is important in this study where I began without a notion of whether meaning could be made from the seemingly intractable problem of how to embed equity into skills policy.

Philosophically, the research design of this study is founded on intrinsic axiology; on the puzzle approach that did not seek out to answer a problem but to enquire whether meaning could be found; and on heurism as that problem solves based on probabilities and intuition. I struggled to define epistemology and ontology at the outset but these began to fall into place as I learned to deeply probe, and question, what were my basic beliefs. I reiterate that axiology, although I understood this belatedly, guided the research right from the first steps of choice of the problem, through all subsequent steps of guiding paradigms, context, theoretical frameworks, choice of data source and methods for analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

## **3.5 Research Paradigm**

### **3.5.1 Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is evolving and needs to be understood in the context of history, and contemporary properties and characteristics. I discuss each of these below.

#### ***3.5.1.1 History***

There is a range of philosophical traditions, methodological techniques and practices which may appear in the term “qualitative research” (Mason, 2012, p. 2). A definition of qualitative research can be said to commonly share a view that the paradigm’s importance is that it celebrates “... richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity” (Mason, 2012, p. 2) and does not aim to edit this out. Qualitative research is concerned with generalities and with contexts that cross and intersect with each other (Mason, 2012).

Chronologically, the history of qualitative research is short. The history comprises “eight moments” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a, p. 14). Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) eight moments begin with the “traditional period from the early 1900s to World War 2”, to the modernist “golden age”, to the “Blurred genres” moment from about 1970 to 1986, to the “crisis of representation” and the triple crisis of “representation, legitimation and praxis”. The remaining moments span about 15 years and are described by Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) as: the post-modern period of experimental ethnographic writing; the seventh moment of post-experimental enquiry to 2000 and the

“methodologically contested period” to the time of the article’s publication in 2005. An important moment in qualitative research history is *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) often referred to as *The Discovery*. Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) note the publication out of the “Chicago School” as a break with the colonialist past where research was primarily an ethnographic exercise in representing the “other” (p. 16).

Thematically, the history is of interpretation and ethnography and is marked by “tensions, contradictions and hesitations” (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 31). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) posit that qualitative research has always been judged in terms of epistemology in how we seek to interpret our hopes and values. However, epistemology itself is emerging from historical positions and “... many received discourses on epistemology are now being re-evaluated” (p. 14). Qualitative research is traditionally a complex interplay of discourses of postmodernism, modernism, realism and humanism (Mason, 2012). Mason proposes that postmodernism has the doubting sensibility; modernism and realism involve discourse but operate in a realm of greater certainty than postmodernism; humanism is characterised by “living and breathing, embodied and feeling human beings” (2012, p. 6). Changing themes bring changing methods. Within the broad debates, it is knowledge that we debate together with how we interpret and represent it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

### **3.5.1.2 Contemporary Properties and Characteristics**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, debate about qualitative research spills in an unprecedented way into neo-liberal discourse of power and structure (Denzin, 2014). Denzin (2014) argues that qualitative research is within a new “paradigm war” (4.06). The qualitative versus quantitative “great divide” (Crotty, 1998; O’Leary, 2014) of the 20th century broadens to a “war” with evidence-based method. In 2014, Denzin refers to the conGT of Charmaz as the “next starting place for the next generation of social science scholars” and a “ground-breaking” (Charmaz, 2014, cover) moment in the history of qualitative research. In Clarke’s terms, from the outset grounded theory was almost “already around the post-modern turn” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxxii) and had leap-frogged other qualitative approaches to postmodern concepts of representation. By 2000, Charmaz (2000, 2008a, 2008c) had begun to explicitly use the term “constructivism”. Charmaz published with Corbin, Clarke, Stern, Morse and Bowers to write within the context of constructivism of a “second generation of grounded theorists” (2009). Higginbottom and Laudensson (2014) draw attention that this was in a time of fertile ground for new ideas in qualitative research – during Denzin and Lincoln’s period of blurred genres.

Within the qualitative research community, there is decreasing necessity to legitimise the characteristics of qualitative research – “...discussions are less frequently found in the literature and there is some consensus as to what constitutes qualitative inquiry” (Creswell, 2014, p. 185).

Consensus flows from the acknowledgement of multiple realities and logically progresses to changing ideas of the role of former research, of freeing up of sources of data, of induction, the nature of meaning and emerging research design. Creswell (2014) offers eight core characteristics which are paraphrased and located within the following table.

**Table 3.1: Qualitative Research: Characteristics and Properties**

Characteristics	Properties
<b>Natural setting</b>	Data collected where participants experience the central phenomenon
<b>Researcher as key instrument</b>	Researchers themselves gather data; they do not rely on data of other researchers
<b>Multiple sources of data</b>	Data include interviews, documents, observations, audio-visual
<b>Inductive and deductive data analysis</b>	Patterns are built bottom up, iteratively to deduct whether more data are required
<b>Participants' meanings</b>	Focus on participant meanings, not researchers'
<b>Emergent design</b>	Researchers learn from participants  Questions, data collection, individuals and sites may change
<b>Reflexivity</b>	Researcher is conscious of self. This is more than "merely advancing biases and values in the study ..."
<b>Holistic account</b>	Researchers report multiple perspectives and sketch the larger pictures that emerge.

Figure formulated from *Research Design* (Creswell, 2014, p. 185).

There is now emerging resolution about evolved core, operational characteristics of qualitative research, of positivism and of constructivism. Such evolution impinges on the research methodology of constructivist grounded theory which I take up in the following sections.

## 3.6 Research Methodology

Methodology in this study laid the foundation for flexible guidelines (Charmaz, 2014) to enable understanding about the phenomenon of equity in skills policy from the construction of perspectives of all its actors – policy-makers; providers; teachers and trainers; and learners.



Qualitative research and the intellectual puzzle of the study do perforce engage the “politics of evidence” (Denzin, 2014). This is because the intellectual puzzle engages with the global conversation about qualitative research within academic research but also with the evidence-based research movement within policy-making (Denzin & Giardina, 2009). Denzin and Giardina (2009) write: “This conversation turns on issues surrounding the politics and ethics of evidence and the value of qualitative work in addressing matters of equity and social justice. Those battles go to representation of evidence and how we represent and evaluate qualitative research” (p. 11). It is in this way that the politics of evidence debate affects the methodology of this study. I next discuss methodology of grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory.

### 3.6.1 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory began in 1967 with the publication of Glaser and Strauss’s *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. The grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss did two things. Grounded theory gave a new way of knowing, together with systematic strategies for undertaking research (Charmaz, 2014). It met head on the quantitative critics of its time who saw qualitative research as “impressionistic, anecdotal, systematic, and biased” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 8). Glaser and Strauss also established that “... qualitative analysis had its own logic and could generate theory” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 6). Glaser and Strauss established that their logic meant that qualitative research did not need scientific method.

It is important to dwell on what it was that was “discovered”. Although the word was to become contested philosophically – is it positivist, or not? (Bryant, 2003) – it is nonetheless significant that, in an era of dominant quantitative methodology, Glaser and Strauss proposed a new way of doing research – of “discovering” theory through data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). In this way, grounded theory was arguably on a postmodern trajectory before other areas of qualitative research (Clarke, 2005). Bryant and Charmaz (2007) demonstrate that in its short 40-year history, and bolstered by the 1987 publication of Strauss’s *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (Strauss, 1987), grounded theory is “... the most widely used and popular qualitative research method across a wide range of disciplines and subject areas” (p. 1). Nonetheless, grounded theory can still be a contested concept both philosophically and regarding method while still holding strong its fundamental concepts.

Glaser and Strauss were both sociologists, of complementary although different strengths, at Chicago University when their grounded theory began. Grounded theory can be distinguished from ethnography which has origins in anthropology; or phenomenological research which is founded in philosophy (Creswell, 2014). Grounded theory is a sociological perspective of social reality and how

to represent this and legitimate findings. *The Discovery* was the first time that researchers had comprehensive, written, analytical – decidedly not descriptive – processes. Glaser and Strauss's use of "discovery" arguably emulated the objectivist tradition although the authors "rebuffed the dominance of the positivist approach at the time" (Griffiths & McKenna, 2013, p. 19). Grounded theory brought together two sociological strengths and provided that constant comparison of evidence, and systematic analysis could go from the descriptive to theoretical explanation of human behaviour (Griffiths & McKenna, 2013).

Grounded theory methodology generates theory which will support its intended use by staying close to empirical material and persistently interacting with it (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) contrast this position with theory generated by logic and deduction from preconceptions which may distract from empirical material. Grounded theory aims to fit and work with the research inquiry. Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasise:

By "fit" we meant that categories must be readily (not forcibly) applicable to and indicated by the data under study; by "work" we mean that they must be meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behaviour under study (p. 3).

The focus on theory that is not forced, that fits and works, gives rise to features that make grounded theory unique among other types of qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). First, concepts are generated from empirical material systematically but not a descriptive or linear way – this is one of the ways in which the research is "grounded". Second, collection of evidence and analysis are inter-related – they continue in an ongoing cycle during the research (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). The distinctive methodological features of grounded theory as defined by Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) represent a spiral. However, to achieve grounded theory that fits and works, the researcher will identify by traditional method a set of common characteristics. Mills et al. (2006) distinguish the characteristics of: analysis through theoretical sensitivity; sampling for theory, not by numbers; using literature as data; using methods of comparison in coding; verifying through comparison rather than by reference to previous research; and using memos and diagrams to represent analysis. Mills et al. propose that in this way, by definition, grounded theory will fit and work in a systematic way and will be accessible to laypeople and to researchers who work in other areas of research (Mills et al., 2006).

An apparent "wide conceptual divide" (Griffiths & McKenna, 2013, p. 18) between Glaser and Strauss was harbinger to later diversions to Glaserian grounded theory and Straussian grounded theory (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). Glaser as a critical realist has continued with the original positivist/post-positivist perspective of grounded theory with a conviction that theory is formed by data that emerge from induction. Strauss, with his leanings to pragmatism and symbolic

interactionism, moved to a relativist and more constructivist epistemology (Griffiths & McKenna, 2013). To Strauss and Corbin, induction is not a pure process; theory emerges from the researcher who is not a *tabula rasa*. Theory should be generated through the exercise of theoretical sensitivity. Kelle (2005) takes the view that grounded theory is distinguished by ways in which data become theory: by how one views *emergence* on the one hand, and *theoretical sensitivity* on the other. How one views these features are a foundation for understanding conGT where an intrinsic factor is that theory is constructed through our own, and our interview participants', past and present interactions with people and things in the world (Charmaz, 2014). That is to say, we are not *tabulae rasa* and therefore theory will not emerge without some influence from us and without our theoretical sensitivity. Bearing in mind the wide conceptual divide and considerations of emergence and theoretical sensitivity, I will now discuss the conGT of Charmaz as it evolved from the CGT of Glaser and Strauss 1967.

### 3.6.2 Constructivist Grounded Theory

Charmaz's *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2014) is characterised by the epistemology of constructivism integrated with symbolic interactionism (Keller & Charmaz, 2016 para 6); by the advocacy for social justice research; by methodology of subjectivity with theoretical sensitivity; and reflexivity (Charmaz, 2014). It is a methodology/theory/methods package that features systematic, integrated research consistent with classic grounded theory. As Charmaz reports to Keller (2016), the grounded theory strategies are neutral. The philosophy is not neutral but "... it doesn't have to rest on that epistemology ..." (para 6). The apparent divergences from classic grounded theory and conGT can be seen through the lenses of those scholars most influenced by Glaser and those most receptive to Strauss (Griffiths & McKenna, 2013). Griffiths and McKenna (2013) point out that Glaser designed a structured approach to interpretation that rigorously coded and analysed data. Strauss by contrast was rooted in Chicago school tradition and symbolic interactionism (Griffiths & McKenna, 2013). Constructivist grounded theory is a "second generation" (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014) melding of the rigour of Glaser's empiricism and Strauss's more humanist approach but it takes on other properties, not the least of which is the advocacy for social justice research (Charmaz, 2014).

A methodological consideration of this study was whether a normative social justice, human rights approach would undermine the plausibility of the grounded theory. Might I, for example, be forcing data (Charmaz, 2014) because I had clearly begun with preconceptions based in law? Relying on Charmaz, some rebuttal would lie in the strategy of reflexivity and in acknowledging subjective research as ideological (Charmaz, 2014) and not value free. However, how does that position of freedom of values fit with social justice research where, by definition, we come with preconceptions

of what is to be valued? (Crotty, 1998). I conceptualised this matter by recognising that, despite grounded theory resistance to preconceived ideas, the starting point of a critical researcher is often preconceived (Scotland, 2012) and, very significantly, there is “... an emergent, recursive relationship between theory, data research questions and interpretation” (p. 13). One of the methods I used in reflexivity of preconceptions is to discuss social justice in two ways: from a philosophical perspective and as a theoretical perspective (Chapter 3). In these ways, I hope to comprehensively integrate opportunities for reflexivity into the research design.

At the beginning of this chapter, I drew attention that this study involves emerging conGT and conGT as methodology for social justice. I selected features of conGT that have application in this study of equity in skills policy. I discuss below: conGT social justice to imagine forward; social justice in the social sciences; an interdisciplinary approach; basic social process; constructivism and objectivism; subjectivity; theoretical sensitivity; limitations and strengths of constructivist grounded theory in social justice research; opportunities of conGT in policy.

### **3.6.3 A Constructivist Grounded Theory (ConGT) Approach to Social Justice to Imagine Forward**

The intellectual puzzle called for a policy approach with a methodology/methods package and I had established that my axiology was intrinsic to constructivist research. I was influenced by Denzin (2014) and Charmaz (2014) who emphasise that new approaches in methodology, and engagement with neo-liberal policy, call for new, or renewed, reflections of what constitutes empirical material and how it should be represented. However, Lather (2013), while endorsing these positions, locates them as another “turn” or “return” in a confusing array of evolving paradigms and methodologies. Lather promotes research that will “*imagine forward*” and enact a “post” or an “after” of neo-liberalism (p. 1). In this study, the presentation of a tentative formal theory is very conscious of Lather’s “imagining forward”. I aimed for renewed reflections and to envision what might be in methodology and theory, regarding equity in skills policy.

To approach the research topic through conGT, I needed to accommodate broad questions of approaches to social justice research and methodological considerations. This resulted in consideration of the matters I deal with in this section.

#### **3.6.3.1 Social Justice in the Social Sciences**

Equity is defined internationally and nationally as a matter of individual and social fairness and inclusion (S. Field et al., 2007b; Ministerial Council on Education, 2008) and as such is a matter of social justice. The social sciences have come relatively recently to social justice inquiry (Charmaz,

2014; Denzin & Giardina, 2010; Madison, 2011; Mills & Birks, 2015). The inevitable links with contemporary policy-making and how to make them visible are not widely researched. Making links visible is a complex undertaking within neo-liberal governance and new public administration paradigms (Turnbull, 2011), explored in other parts of this study (Chapter 2 and Chapter 6), where “big data” (Keller & Charmaz, 2016, p. 5) and policy objectives privilege the commercial market and positivist methodology dominates over interpretivist inquiry.

Social justice research involves a critical approach, calls for looking at conGT from selected perspectives and for highlighting strategies for representation (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2013) styles social justice studies as “looking at both realities and ideals” (p. 510). In these terms, researchers concerned with social justice will contest meanings of “shoulds” and “oughts” and “openly bring their shoulds and oughts into the discourse of inquiry” (Charmaz, 2013, p. 510). The turn to social justice has been a drive toward purposes that may “ameliorate injustice” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1117) within public administration paradigms that privilege competition policy and marketisation. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggested that this was a new point in history and Denzin has emphasised this since (Denzin, 2014). Mieth (1997, p. 93) had referred to this as where interpersonal responsibility melds with the “... quality of being with and for the other, not looking at” the other (de Laine, 2000, p. 16).

There is a close connection between what social justice is and how it is done. Charmaz proposes that the critical stance of social justice research can be advanced by analytic focus of grounded theory. Charmaz’s (2005, 2013, 2014) writing places social justice in the context of grounded theory that has the constructivist epistemology and subjective interpretivist methodology. In this study, which the evidence drove towards human rights and policy, I drew in Charmaz (2005, 2013, 2014) to a social justice perspective emerging from the grounded evidence. The broad questions I was posing led to the need for interdisciplinary investigation of approaches to social justice research.

### ***3.6.3.2 An Interdisciplinary Approach***

To explore social justice, I integrated the history and political science disciplinary background of Bevir (2010) with Charmaz (2013, 2014). Bevir (2010) emphasises the significance of local research as foundation to social justice research. Further, there are links between social justice approaches and interpretivism (of the local) i as study participants’ reasoning occurs in the context of their existing, or local, “webs of belief” (Bevir, 2010, p. 261). “Local” does not refer to geography but to context and contingent circumstances (Turnbull, 2011, p. 255) that are crucial to formulating policy that is effective.

With Bevir in mind, I drew on a synthesis of the propositions of Charmaz (2014) to approach social justice in this study from three perspectives. First, I am interested in the intrinsic links of ideas and actions of fairness, equity and equality, together with individual and collective rights and obligations. Second, there is a systematic, empirical, critical approach to integrate subjective experience with social conditions together with actions, organisations and social institutions. Third, I selected concepts that sensitise social justice that are hierarchies, ideologies and policies and practices which are consistent with conGT (Charmaz, 2014). I extracted the concept of resources as it may sensitise social justice and policy because that is what the emerging theory did (Chapters 5 and 6). So, the study is local, about equity, about the learner within broader realms of hierarchies, ideologies, policies and practices. Resource constraints on policy may appear to be an omission but this is not really the case as human rights are presumptive, not absolute (Bagaric et al., 2011) and resource considerations do come into play. As evidence and analysis developed, the elements of social justice emerged, and I considered how to represent the basic social process which I discuss as follows.

### **3.6.3.3 Basic Social Process?**

Charmaz (2014) and Clarke (2005) argue for research of basic social process that will consider the micro, or individual, as well as broader realms of meso and macro levels of theorising necessary for social justice research. Glaser would argue that despite his earliest supportive positions (Glaser, 1978), recognising and extending a basic social process, as this study has done (Chapter 5) to support social justice inquiry, undermines the grounded theory tenet that data should not be forced.

In this study I found that representation of and methodology for social justice inquiry calls for broader perspectives than only a single basic social process. There was no single basic social process. Rather, the study called for an approach where the evidence of different participants could be represented in a basic process of multiple realities. Recognising multiple processes allowed me to draw out different actions, processes and words which was what Charmaz (2014) anticipated would happen.

As a final observation, I acknowledge the *tabula rasa* and cannot produce any “guarantee of neutrality” (Bryant, 2003, p. 2) with regard to the formulation of the basic social process as Glaser and Strauss (1967) in the past, and Glaser (2002) in the present, may seek to do. For positivist policy-makers, admitting non-neutrality may be a reason to reject the theory of this study. I have striven to generate theory, to be applicable to the topic and capable of advancing understanding and opportunities for prediction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as “wicked problems” in policy call for (Briggs, 2007). With further social justice and methodological considerations, I returned to more detail of the

Charmaz philosophical perspectives of constructivism and objectivism and what these may mean for methodology in a social justice study.

### **3.6.3.4 Constructivism and Objectivism**

Bryant (2003) argues that Charmaz has provided a useful and timely clarification of muddy objectivist/constructivist positions in grounded theory that colour and impact upon key defining phrases.

Charmaz's position revealed her relativist ontology and the subjective epistemology of the evolved grounded theory (Mills et al., 2006) and was distinguished from Glaser and Strauss in this way. The Charmaz book (2014) title helped to clarify the propensity for the language of discovery to conflict with the induction of theory so central to traditional grounded theory (Griffiths & McKenna, 2013). Glaser severely criticised Charmaz's position and their differences around whether or not data are forced by certain processes are the "fodder for intellectual debate" (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014, p. 12). Nonetheless, conGT maintains the aim of traditional grounded theory to generate plausible, grounded theory "as process", "... as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 32). Mills et al. (2006) enjoin us to think in terms of development of theory-making and not in terms of "a situation of *binary* opposition" among grounded theorists (p. 3) [my emphasis]. Charmaz writes of the "methodological eclecticism" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 27) and "constellation of methods rather than an array of different methods" (p. 14) within grounded theory and in this way is consistent with the stance of Mills et al (2006). In this study, a non-binary, or Glaser/Strauss v. Charmaz, position benefits understanding of how to embed equity in skills policy because I can draw into constructivist research theory that some may argue is philosophically objectivist. Nonetheless, subjectivity is an essential element of the constructivist grounded theory of Charmaz (2014) and called for exploration with regard to this study.

### **3.6.3.5 Subjectivity**

Subjectivity in research upends traditional objectivist positions and impinges upon the philosophy of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 14). Subjectivity in social justice research which will inevitably engage public policy analysis may be something else again. Subjectivity in conGT is distinguished from social constructivist positions which involve a world constructed by human beings as they interact and engage in interpretation (O'Leary, 2014). For Charmaz (2014), it is more than that: "subjectivity is inseparable from social existence" (p. 14). In this way Charmaz differentiates her work from conventional social constructionism of the 1980s and 1990s. Charmaz (2014) writes: "I chose the term 'constructivist' to acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher's involvement in the

construction and interpretation of data” (p. 14). Grounded theory strategies are separable from the notions of traditional objective, external realities (Charmaz, 2014). The significance of conGT is that it turns around traditional epistemologies and begins with “... the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual and constructed ...”. In this case, we must:

take the researcher’s position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality. It, too, is a construction ... of which we may not be aware and which may not be of our choosing (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13).

It is notable that qualitative research generally in the social sciences, if not in policy analysis, has given way to the conGT position on reflexivity which now appears as an integral part of effective 21<sup>st</sup> century qualitative research (Table 3.1).

In sum, I had proposed a basic social process that could engage interdisciplinary micro, meso and macro inquiry with eclectic, subjective, methodology. I was not taking the Glaserian approach with regard to basic social process but I was nonetheless concerned to induct, if not in a purist manner, then in a way that had grounded theory integrity. The next task was to determine how this was to be implemented, and this called for theoretical sensitivity.

### **3.6.3.6 Theoretical Sensitivity**

My original memos asked questions about how I should know if I were theoretically sensitive, or not; what if I’m not theoretically sensitive; is theoretical sensitivity something that can be learned? Fortunately, theoretical sensitivity grows and increases as data are analysed (Birks & Mills, 2011). Giske and Artinian (2007) reassure similarly that undertaking the research builds learning, learning that will be different for each researcher, and opens opportunity for formulation of concepts. My experience with this study, and my inference from the literature, is that theoretical sensitivity should be intrinsic to policy analysis and complex social justice inquiry because it cultivates the essential ingredient of understanding individual lived experience within broader organisational frameworks.

Theoretical sensitivity is intrinsic to both philosophical and methodological aspects of grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Keller & Charmaz, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 2014). Theoretical sensitivity draws in related characteristics of grounded theory most notably: whether truth can be inducted objectively; the nature of induction; whether it is possible not to force data uncontaminated by researcher influence. These matters impinge on how we practice interpretation. Further, one’s position on interpreting through literature will be caught up in how uncontaminated and how purist one can be in induction. Glaser and Strauss (1967) saw the concept from two perspectives. First, theoretical sensitivity depends on insight into the significance of the *tabula rasa*



and its relation to how theory is generated. Second, theoretical sensitivity reflects the researcher's knowledge and experience and whether and how self-knowledge is used; whether one is reflexive. When Glaser took the path to pure induction and espoused that theory "emerged" from data analysis, despite his early protestations, he was taking the position that the researcher as *tabula rasa* could exist; theory could emerge quite independently of the researcher self (Kelle, 2005). In this way, truth could emerge and of itself be objective. Strauss took a different route to argue that truth could not be objective; that the "theoretical sensitivity" originally espoused in *The Discovery* is necessary to generate theory.

Theoretical sensitivity draws on methodology, the Straussian (Strauss, 1987) concept of data that is "contextualized" or "decontextualized" (p. 160), and on theoretical perspective. Charmaz (2014) defines key elements of theoretical sensitivity as analytic precision deriving from coding, especially gerund coding; capacity for abstract theorising of phenomena, patterns and their properties and the relationship among them. In an interview with Keller, Charmaz emphasised how theoretical sensitivity develops also through the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Keller & Charmaz, 2016) and connections with induction. Charmaz (2014) approaches theoretical sensitivity through Straussian (Strauss, 1987) considerations of whether data are "contextualised" or "decontextualized" (p. 160).

Theoretical sensitivity engages with the original grounded theory concept of forcing data. Charmaz is influenced by Strauss (1987) and later Strauss and Corbin (1998), who argued that we could not avoid forcing data, or practice pure induction, but we could be supported by appropriate strategies for theoretical sensitivity consistent with grounded theory. Those strategies included working implicitly or explicitly within a framework of context and conditions; interaction among the actors; strategies and tactics; and consequences (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 2014). Generally, Charmaz provides a way of looking at the forcing of data through intersection with the development of theoretical sensitivity and provides strategy and some tools for doing so. The key is constant analysis. Then, Charmaz predicts (2014), theoretical sensitivity will burgeon into a capacity for interpretation and "the rest will fall into place" (p. 161). In this study, the Charmaz approach is relied upon and I interpret and analyse with reference to the concepts of abstraction and conceptualisation, and context and conditions, but I take these matters further in Theoretical Perspectives (3.7).

### **3.6.3.7 Limitations and Strengths of Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Charmaz proposes that limitations to grounded theory will emerge relative to the institutional positivist culture within which research topics are designed, ethics considerations are addressed, auditing processes are applied and funding applications are successful (2014).

Limitations may be perceived with regard to the logic of grounded theory methods which may reflect on conGT. Criticisms of grounded theory are that it is vague and unspecific (Rennie, 2000), that it lacks precision and explicit guidelines (Allen, 2010). Goldthorpe (2000) denounces its extreme inductivism” (p. 2). Richards and Farrokhnia (2016) point to a perception of grounded theory as superficial theorising, as chaotic and time-consuming. Keller & Charmaz (2016) cite the example of the US National Science Foundation raising issues with qualitative research generally and grounded theory as to whether they are sufficiently rigorous for funding proposals (para. 6). Charmaz (2016) highlights education research also as an area where grounded theory is viewed sceptically and as a naïve approach to research.

Despite being one of the most cited approaches in qualitative research, grounded theory in all its evolutions is contested methodology (Charmaz, 2014) from outside and from within. Externally, grounded theory is constrained by resistances to qualitative research generally where evidence-based/neo-positivist research prevails, and demonstrated strong return in the 1990s and 2000s (Keller & Charmaz, 2016), and lack of international awareness of the evolution from the classic grounded theory in particular. Obstacles to undertaking conGT are grounded in the prevailing neo-liberal and positivist institutional structures (Keller & Charmaz, 2016) and it is precisely these obstacles that this social justice research is engaging. I look at opportunities of conGT from this perspective.

### ***3.6.3.8 Opportunities of ConGT in Policy***

I have drawn attention to opportunities from the emerging conGT for emerging social justice research (Charmaz, 2014). Richards and Farrokhnia (2016) point to new opportunity also in applying grounded theory to policy research. The authors acknowledge the critiques of grounded theory and argue that the evolution towards a more structured and focused version of analysis presents opportunities not available in other forms of research.

The key opportunity, Richards and Farrokhnia (2016) posit, is to take the strength of the humanistic approach in grounded theory and to cultivate its potential for organised approaches to problem-solving especially in the context of “wicked” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) problems in the postmodern era. My analysis of the research of opportunities is that, from the falling away of pure induction to the focus on theoretical sensitivity, conceptual analysis and philosophical clarity, Strauss (1987), Strauss and Corbin (2014) and Charmaz (2014) together provided new foundations for focused and structured analysis which may apply in 21<sup>st</sup> century governance and public administration problems that are plural, pluralistic, global and intractable. In the next section, I explore these foundations with reference to the human rights perspective of this study.

### **3.6.3.9 Constructivist Grounded Theory for Skills Policy and Equity: A Matter of Human Rights**

In Figure 3.1 below, I set out the evolution of key features of grounded theory to conGT drawing on *The Discovery* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Strauss, 1987) and *ConGT* (Charmaz, 2014). I draw attention to the continuance from 1967 to Charmaz in 2014 of: theory by theorising; no forcing data; basic social process; and theoretical sensitivity. In this evolution from the 1970s to the 1990s, Glaser, the empiricist, continues with purist induction and rejects theoretical sensitivity and basic social process as forcing data. He continues to eschew the literature review. Strauss develops the imperative of emphasising context and conditions under which theory is formed. Charmaz (2014) consolidates methodology that is overtly subjective/interpretivist, conceptual, exercised with theoretical sensitivity and flexible guidelines. Charmaz builds on the Straussian propositions of context and conditions and symbolic interactionism.



**Figure 3.1: Methodology of Glaser, Strauss and Charmaz for Skills Policy and Equity: A Matter of Human Rights**

From 2000 to the most recent publication on conGT (Charmaz, 2014), Charmaz has built on methodology that has provided a basis for examining the social justice matters that are the subject of this research. In the following section, I connect the methodological position with theoretical perspectives designed for this research.

### 3.7 Theoretical Perspectives

This section represents the theoretical perspectives which underpin this study. I introduce these with social justice which I have covered in Research Methodology above but which requires further elaboration in a specific function of theoretical perspective. I follow the social justice theoretical perspectives with symbolic interactionism and pragmatism, and situated interpretivism. Symbolic interactionism and pragmatism is established as a theoretical perspective to conGT (Charmaz, 2014).

The theoretical perspective of situated interpretivism is one which Clarke (2005) has exhorted researchers to elevate to theory rather than method for the purposes of social justice research.

The necessity of inclusion of social justice as theoretical perspective is my proposal and came very late in the study as I struggled with analysis and representation of theory. I seek to make the point that social justice research that invokes conGT is underpinned by a theoretical perspective beyond the usual symbolic interactionism and pragmatism in conGT. I re-cap key elements of social justice (3.7.1) which emphasised the significance of local, situated interpretation and an approach delimited by the substantive grounded theory to hierarchies, ideologies and policies and practices. I reiterate the significance of this approach for policy decisions requiring context and response to contingent circumstances (Turnbull, 2011). I discuss each of the theoretical perspectives in the following sections.

### **3.7.1 Social Justice**

I have proposed theoretical perspective for social justice for the fundamental reason that the evidence and conGT itself showed that a distinction needs to be made with traditional critical inquiry. The evidence emerged that critical inquiry did not underpinned by the theoretical perspective to induct subjective evidence, to situate learners' disposition in macro and meso policy fields, and to speak directly to a theory of governance of equity and public administration. There are three related reasons. First, Charmaz (2014) characterises theoretical perspectives as a lens, as sensitising concept, and especially useful if open-ended, and encourages adaptation and integration of theoretical perspectives as required by a particular study. In this study, social justice is a lens to equity in skills policy as Charmaz describes. Second, evidence drove the view that a social justice perspective did itself require theorising of integrating concepts – philosophical and methodological – of the nature of truth, the nature of government and public administration and how to fit the two together. Third, this study aims for consistency between philosophy and methods where I put together the subjectivity of conGT with social justice analysis. It is an important distinction where much traditional social justice research is positivist and descriptive (Charmaz, 2014). ConGT was proposed by Charmaz (2003, 2006, 2014) as one way of clarifying contested areas of grounded theory and the differences will affect how social justice research is undertaken.

With a social justice lens, this study speaks to policy-makers who are dealing with “wicked problems” (Briggs, 2007) and exploring new ways to understand, not solve, intractable problems. In this study, I explored *tools* for social justice research to theorise about individual subjective experience within broader social and organisational realms. Distinguishing between *tools* and *prescriptions* in methods,

aids the flexibility that policy-makers require. In clarifying the tools of the study, I found that *concept*, *conditions* and *context*, originally emphasised as intrinsic to grounding subjective, abstract theorising (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 2014) also had application for broader social justice inquiry. Further, I then had the flexibility in conGT to develop the substantive grounded theory with micro, meso and macro analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Micro, meso and macro were defined with reference to Creswell as methodologist and Miner as organisational theorist such that: micro is “... limited to small slices of time, space, or numbers of people ...” (Creswell, 2014, p. 54); meso is that which links the micro to macro theory of an organisation to provide “... bridging or linking propositions ...” (Miner, 2015, p. 14); macro focuses on “... behaviour and nature of organisations, not of individuals and groups” (Miner, 2015, p. 14).

Out of emerging evidence, I designed lens, *tools* and multi-layered levels of inquiry for undertaking social justice research. I submit that social justice calls for its own positioning as theoretical perspective. Having established a social justice perspective, I integrated with symbolic interactionism and pragmatism, which I next discuss.

### **3.7.2 Symbolic Interactionism and Pragmatism**

Charmaz proposes (2014) that symbolic interaction begins with the symbols that arise from each individual’s interpretation of the world. Interaction is the process by which people draw on their symbols and their engagement with others, make their interpretations of reality, and then decide how to behave. The individual’s symbols and his or her interactions with them are a matter for the researcher to explore.

The vital links of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism to this research are human agency, language and interpretation in social worlds that are temporal and emergent (Charmaz, 2014). Further, symbolic interactionism and pragmatism as philosophical positions (Charmaz, 2014) link to my stated axiology, or basic beliefs, concerned with social justice and matters of change and consequent constructivist and subjective approaches. To Charmaz (2014), symbolic interactionism and pragmatism offer a, but not the only, “theory-methods package” (Keller & Charmaz, 2016, p. s.5) with “concepts and guiding assumptions” (p. 262) integral to conGT. This section discusses symbolic interactionism and pragmatism especially as these relate to this social justice study.

Charmaz (2014, p. 261) contends that symbolic interaction does not merely express or release, it forms human conduct. Charmaz (2014) synthesises the early 20th century symbolic interactionism of Mead (1934), and of pragmatist philosophy of Herbert, meshed with the Chicago school heritage of Blumer, Glaser and Strauss, and Strauss and Corbin in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Adopting a

Straussian approach, Charmaz proposes that symbolic interactionism and pragmatism help researchers to understand and predict, though not explain, behaviours and to learn about how other people's interpretations of their world guide their subsequent actions (Charmaz, 2014, p. 262). Charmaz emphasises the Blumer concept of *interpretation* as intrinsic to understanding symbolic interactionism but not as an astructural position: social structures exist but "... people construct and reproduce them" (p. 265).

Conditions of actions are central to relating action, interaction and consequences, posit Strauss and Corbin (2014). We should be able to propose that under conditions and given the meaning we inducted from empirical evidence, one can expect a probable result even allowing for unpredictable human behaviour. Corbin and Strauss (2008) developed the extensively cited 14 "assumptions", or "working axioms" that underpin their interactionist and pragmatic philosophy. These assumptions they conflate to write that the pragmatism and interactionism underlying their method and research strategies embrace: inevitable contingencies; notions of process of the great variety of human action, interaction; and emotional responses to events and dilemmas. Corbin and Strauss (2008) argue that societies comprise human responses that impact, limit and contribute and through interaction lead to restructure the nature of the human response. In turn, Corbin and Straus contend: "Humans also shape their institutions; they create and change the world around them through action/interaction" (2008, p. 3). Chamberlain-Salaun, Mills and Usher (2013) organise the assumptions into themes of meaning, action and interaction, self and the sub-theme of perspectives to give practical guidance on how these link with grounded theory methods. I used their Table 3: Cross Referencing of Essential Grounded Theory Methods and Assumptions (p. 8) as a check and balance to analysis of empirical data especially when abducting and theorising towards formal theory (Chapter 6). In this way, it was demonstrated that symbolic interactionism and pragmatism are perspectives that practically apply to social justice research.

Charmaz (2014) sets out the basic premises of symbolic interactionism of Blumer and Strauss as involving the actions of human beings conditioned by meaning of things for them derived from interaction with others and interpretation of things encountered. Charmaz (2014) adds additional premises that she had first outlined in 1980:

1. "Meanings are interpreted through shared *language* and communication.
2. The mediation of meaning in social interaction is distinguished by a continually emerging *processional* nature" (p. 270).

Symbolic interactionism is an agentic tool which is central to this investigation of learner disposition and of social justice issues. It has significance in opening up opportunity for this study involving

exploration of local people, traditions and dilemmas within broad local but also national organisational and social and cultural frameworks. With ways of working with symbols and language, I needed to be able to situate these within the basic social process. I turned to Clarke (2005), as discussed in the following section.

### **3.7.3 Situating Interpretation/Analysis**

The key attributes of situated interpretation as theoretical perspective are that not only are “knowers embodied” but also “knowledge is situated” (Clarke, 2005, p. 22). Therefore, in situated interpretation as theoretical perspective, “situations become the fundamental units of analysis” (Clarke, 2005, p. 22). Clarke (2005) provided a theoretical perspective for social justice research to build on the interactionism of conGT. She argues that the concept of interactionism is not sufficient for some grounded theorists who wish to build on it to research in terms of “situatedness” (Clarke, 2005) as theoretical perspective and not only as method. Situatedness involves understanding the “incredibly variegated panorama of human living” (Clarke, 2005, p. 9). It is different from situational analysis as cartography, or diagramming, which is method.

For the purposes of this study, “situatedness” is an important theoretical perspective as it aims at: supplementing the traditional grounded theory analysis of a basic or key social process (action) with alternatives centred on ... situational analysis at the meso-level, new social organizational/institutional/discursive/practice sitings (Clarke, 2005, p. xxxiii).

Clarke (2005) determined to draw out situatedness because in her view the efforts of others, although they may point in some “right directions”, are “inadequate to the task” (p. 28). Clarke (2005) writes that with Denzin she is “... deeply committed to ‘situating interpretation’” (p. 28). Clarke (2005) asserts that “interactionists (and others) can and should expand their theoretical environment, broaden their perspective to be sensitive to and analyse more general, larger domains of social action” (p. 28). This study has taken up that proposal with regard to situated interpretivism and through the social justice perspective of equity in skills policy.

In sum, I draw on the theoretical perspectives of social justice, symbolic interactionism and pragmatism, and situated interpretivism to provide:

- philosophic and methodological consistency with tools to analyse basic social process in terms of concept, conditions and context at macro, meso and micro levels of inquiry;
- research into human agency, language and interpretation in social worlds that are temporal and emergent; and



- situations as a unit of analysis.

In the next section, I discuss the strategies deployed to move towards a formal theory.

## 3.8 Research Strategies

Mason (2012) proposes that methodology is *strategy* and that methods are a component within the strategies. Consistent with conGT (Charmaz, 2014), I included as research strategies conceptual discussion of: theory and theorising; substantive grounded theory; formal grounded theory; subjectivity and reflexivity; and the silent blueprint. The strategies of moving towards a formal theory and the specific engagement with the silent blueprint are discretionary in grounded theory. These conGT strategies are designed to fit and work with the social justice and policy perspectives of this study.

### 3.8.1 Theory and Theorising

Theorising is a strategic process of constructing and interpreting evidence by which an account of theory as abstract understanding is arrived at (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) writes “Theorising is a *practice*” arguing that “a persuasive theory is compelling ... theories flash illuminating insights and make sense of murky musings and knotty problems. The ideas fit” (p. 223). The role of the theory is to “... offer accounts for what happens, how it ensures, and *may* aim to account for why it happened” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 228). The emphasis on *may* is my own to distinguish constructivism from positivism which has a focus on causality (Charmaz, 2014). Theory is defined by Thornberg and Charmaz (2012) as: “... relationships between abstract concepts” (p. 41) which may aim to explain or understand. Theory is an elastic concept; Clarke mischievously suggests that theory definitions seek to define “what ‘we’ do as well as what ‘they’ do” (Clarke, 2005, p. 31). Nonetheless, Clarke goes on to caution against polarising definitions of theory. In sum, theorising involves abstract and relational thinking which strategically drives theory formulation.

This study produces theory by theorising from grounded empirical material (Charmaz, 2014). The theory should aim to be applicable *without force* to the area of study Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3).; it must be original, credible and useful and it will explain the central phenomena of the study (Charmaz, 2014). Theory can be generated at levels of empirical enquiry of specific issues as well as at more abstract investigation of generic issues (Charmaz, 2014). In grounded theory, these two positions are substantive grounded theory and formal theory respectively. I discuss each of these below.

### **3.8.1.1 Substantive Grounded Theory**

The substantive theory is that which is developed for a substantive, or empirical, area of sociological inquiry. Substantive theory is a “theoretical interpretation or explanation of a delimited problem in a particular area ...” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 344). Substantive grounded theory is “... only a *slice*” of what is going on and will go on”; it is “... abstract of time place and people”; (Glaser, 2012, para. 8). The substantive grounded theory of this study is set out in Figure 5.1 comprising the core categories, categories and properties that emerged from analysis.

The key characteristics of substantive grounded theory involve approaching evidence with consciousness of the need to be as free as possible of preconceived notions of the field of inquiry; collecting and comparing a great deal of evidence to create categories; not “forcing the data” through “logic-deductive or grand theory”; and with a “... focus, a general question, or a problem in mind” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 33). Using theorising as process, grounded theorists begin analysis at the commencement of interviews. Theorising as process then involves generation of multiple theories faithful to the empirical material, determination as to whether grand theory applies, and ultimate application, or rejection, of the emerging theories as they relate to the central phenomenon of the study.

The substantive grounded theory (Figure 5.1) was the springboard for potential formal theory. It involved engaging new literature and a return to comparison and clustering using original empirical material from all levels of inquiry together with comparisons with formulated theory.

### **3.8.1.2 Formal Grounded Theory**

This study moves towards a formal theory of “alternative equity” (Figure 6.4), comprising diagrammatic models of “neo-equity” (Figure 6.4a) and “embedded equity” (Figure 6.4b) which emerged from the substantive grounded theory.

Charmaz (2013) defines formal theory as “... theoretical rendering of a generic issue or process that cuts across several substantive areas of study” (p. 343). The concepts of formal theory are “abstract and general” and the theory “specifies the links between these concepts” (Charmaz, 2013, p. 343). Strauss and Corbin (2014) explain that additional characteristics of formal theories are that they are “... less specific to a group or place, are broader, denser, and can be used to understand a wider range of social concerns and problems” (p. 63) which has relevance to social justice issues. In this study, the potential formal grounded theory is less specific to the studied area of skills development and may be used to understand the potentially dichotomous and conflicting nature of public values in different paradigms of public policy formulation.

The abstraction from the substantive grounded theory towards the formal theory took place with reference to Glaser and Strauss (1967), Charmaz (2014) and Strauss and Corbin (2014) through:

- a process of returning to analysis of concepts, especially through clustering, within the substantive grounded theory;
- comparison with literature across several disciplines of multiple theories, categories and properties of categories, within the substantive grounded theory;
- comparison with literature of emerging categories of formal theory;
- cultivation of insights within the framework of the developing theory;
- application of the Strauss and Corbin (2014) test that the theory has broad application for social problems.

The tentative formal theory seemed to emerge because it was based on a broad intellectual puzzle and I would add this reflection to the points made above. As Charmaz had predicted (2014), the puzzle had allowed for constant addition of evidence right through to the end of the study. Without the strategy of the development intellectual puzzle, it is possible that the analysis of the empirical evidence would move towards a formal theory.

Subjectivity and reflexivity were essential as research strategies for driving the theory and it was important for me to develop an understanding of how the two interacted.

### **3.8.2 Subjectivity and Reflexivity**

Subjectivity is practically conjoined with reflexivity. ConGT recognises subjectivity as drawing in the external influences of the world upon us (Charmaz, 2008b, 2014; Darawsheh, 2014; Thornberg, 2012) which is an up-ended philosophical position from traditional objectivist research (Chapter 1).

Charmaz (2014) invokes Glaser and Strauss to articulate that data are not poured into the researcher as “empty receptacle” (p. 27). Therefore, the purpose of reflexivity is to ensure “... that other researchers have at least a chance to understand their procedures and results” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 27). Darawesh (2014) argues that in this way reflexivity is a matter of affirming rigour in external validity. Chiovitti and Piran (2003) argue that flexible and inducted methods of grounded theory cannot be rigorous without reflexivity. It follows that the researchers have accountability for transparency so that they justify their subjective choice and clarify their concepts and uses (Charmaz, 2014). I refer to Charmaz (2006) in that the methodology of reflexivity grounds and justifies philosophical positions in interpretation and interpretative theory; it is essential as it “... informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants, and represents them in written reports” (p. 189). Subjectivity and reflexivity are often discussed in terms

of whether data is forced and give rise to attenuating considerations. Each of these is discussed below as: perspectives and assumptions, decontextualised analyses, forced data, context and conditions, preconceptions and assumptions.

Strauss and Corbin (2014) allow that “Perspectives and assumptions are deeply ingrained and their influence often imperceptible” (p. 102) and advocate reflexivity as transparency of personal and professional experience. In this, they are at odds with Glaser who regards reflexivity as a paralysing element leading to forcing of data (Glaser, 2006). Charmaz uses the language of “decontextualized analyses” (Charmaz, 2014) to address issues of whether data are “forced” (p. 243). In this way, she draws on the Straussian concept of context and conditions. Charmaz argues that data may be decontextualised because we have not been sufficiently reflexive; or data may be decontextualised because we, by our own philosophical positions, oversimplified and abbreviated the comparative process.

In *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2014), Charmaz’s (2014) definition connects with the philosophical position that we cannot be neutral with regard to our values and we cannot dismiss scrutiny of them on the grounds of scientific neutrality and authority. Charmaz’s (2014) definition of reflexivity is:

The researcher’s scrutiny of the research experience, decisions, and interpretation in ways that bring him or her into the process. Reflexivity includes examining how the researcher’s interests, positions, and assumptions influenced his or her inquiry. A reflexive stance informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants, and represents them in written reports (p. 344).

As well as the elements of this definition, Charmaz (2014) works with additional concepts which are “preconceptions” (p. 155) and “assumptions” (p. 241). Preconceptions are those of the researcher and are highly relevant to focused coding and involve “... such [invisible] standpoints as class, race, gender, age, embodiment, culture and historical era ...” (p. 156). Reflexivity with regard to our own preconceptions is an essential insight when situating interpretation of participants’ meanings and actions of which they themselves may be unaware (Charmaz, 2014, p. 241). “Assumptions” are the foundations on which participants construct their meanings and actions and may reflect ideologies. In turn, ideologies may “... reproduce current ideologies, conventions, discourses and power relationships” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 242).

There may be complexities and limits to reflexivity and these should be subject to scrutiny. For example, Clarke (2005) warns against excessive and indulgent reflexivity that becomes “too much of

‘us’ and too little of ‘them’” (p. 13). There are tools to balance reflexivity at all levels and “these include memos and personal journals” (p. 165). Engaging with layers of elements of reflexivity, it follows that there are “multiple reflexivities” (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003, p. 428) and deciding how I wished to write reflexively was challenging.

Mruck and Mey (2007) clarified that there is no definition of reflexivity; that there are “multiple reflexivities” (p. 517). There is language of reflexivity as “*self-knowledge*”; “*tacit knowledge*”; “*prior knowledge*” through personal and professional experience (Mruck & Mey, 2007, p. 517). I read widely and developed a structure for approaching reflexivity that suited me. First, I thought broadly in terms of philosophical motivation for doing the topic. A key question is: Why am I doing this? “This” might be the topic itself, or some strategic approach. Darasheh (2014) suggests that it is important to “situate the researcher” (p. 564) in this way. Second, I think of reflexivity as a “thought style” (Mruck & Mey, 2007, p. 527) rather than as a disclosure of feelings or emotions. The thought style involves presumptions and assumptions which may have consequences for the research and theory generated. In this study, I came late to recognition of how heavily my thought style is heavily influenced by presumptions and assumptions arising from my training in evidence law. I do, for example, preference witness evidence over literature; I rely heavily on seminal documents and legislation as sources of evidence.

In sum, subjectivity and reflexivity are intrinsic to conGT and intrinsic to each other. Writing reflexively is aided by reference to the concept of whether data are forced which draws in considerations of perspectives and assumptions, contextualised and decontextualised evidence, preconceptions and assumptions. In addition to these considerations, I found that this study relied heavily on representing silence and this is discussed below.

### **3.8.3 The Silent Blueprint**

A distinctive feature of grounded theory is that it engages an old sociological/philosophical question highlighted by Star (1995): “the relationship between the empirical/material on the one hand, and the theoretical/abstract on the other” (p. 265). Philosophically Star (1995) proposes that grounded theory draws in the “relationship between the visible and the invisible” and helps us to look at “the silent blueprint” (p. 266).

The silent blueprint involves more than things not being said. The “silent blueprint” is more than “silent dialogue” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 93) in interviews which may have arisen from the participant’s sensitivities or sensibilities. It is also more than the “wall of silence” (Star, 1995) which may arise when there are quite daunting issues that participants want to avoid. Star (1995) invokes Strauss’s

maxim to “study the unstudied”, to listen to “... another kind of pattern – patterns of the invisibles, such as silences, omissions, areas of neglect” (p. 266). For example, the absence of human rights law in empirical evidence and literature in this study involved both issues of not being talked about as well as the reticence of participants to talk about a complex matter; across the research, the absence of human rights became the “silent blueprint” and ultimately became the central interest of the study. It followed also that theoretical categories are generally based on application of the silent blueprint.

## **3.9 Methodological Considerations and Choices for this Study**

I attempted conGT that goes beyond its focus on the individual and basic social process to take a bird’s eye view of interpretations situated within social and organisational realms. Philosophically and methodologically I ventured into new areas of research as well as policy analysis. The intellectual puzzle is a “wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) requiring a critical social justice element challenging traditional objectivist, descriptive, linear and confined approaches to research (Briggs, 2007). I had created a conGT social justice theoretical study but during and after application of methods I had to make choices about representation. These are fundamental to grounded theory and relate to: representation of the theory; steps I took to turn the traditional literature review into context to theory; and how I had to make choices about the “intensive interview”. I discuss each of these in turn.

### **3.9.1 Representation**

The fundamental methodological consideration for this study is one of representation which is postmodern. For the purposes of this study, postmodernism is not nihilism – the “anything goes” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b) approach – eschewing all traditional ideas. My focus is on postmodernism as the eighth moment struggling with “the crisis of representation” and *the other* (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a, p. 18). I came to realise that representation of empirical evidence seems often to be at the heart of why there is turmoil in interconnecting paradigms (Denzin & Giardina, 2009): in social sciences; in political science; in organisational theory; in education and public policy all of which are relevant to this study. In this study, it is not about quantitative versus qualitative; it is about how can qualitative research be meaningfully represented across a range of disciplines which use different symbols and language? The methodological consideration is to clarify the emerging shape of the research topic; representation is then how to write it down in ways that will be understood by laypeople and, in this study, evocative to policy-makers.

I took the advice of Charmaz (2014) to be prepared to write and organise chapters to fit my topic, rather than to use pre-existing models of the format of theses. Further, I used five tools beyond the necessary memo'ing. The first five are: the use of the Foreword in the front of this thesis; the inclusion of a section in each chapter, with the exception of Chapter 7, about the “representation of”; the representation in Chapter 2 of evolving context that relates to the intellectual puzzle as well as to the theory of Chapters 5 and 6; the conscious decision to separate methodology and methods as theory/methods package and to give each detailed attention; and the decision to draw in writing grounded theory as an issue of method (Chapter 4). Finally, my language is consciously adapted to fit with constructivist philosophy and to distinguish from positivism. As Denzin (2014) recommends, I try not to use the term “data” for its positivist associations. I similarly avoid other terms such as validity, or findings. My preferences are for empirical material, or evidence, or theory.

### **3.9.2 Contextual Literature**

I relied on *contextualised* analysis of data, including literature (Charmaz, 2014) to resist forcing data. Vigilance was needed to decide whether literature was an essential comparative element contributing to its task to be the “springboard” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 32, 79) of substantive grounded theory to the potential formal theory or whether its place was contextual in the sense of background to subjectivity.

Consistent with conGT, the task was to privilege the theory over literature (Ramalho et al., 2015). This calls for forensic care in deploying literature, both supporting and conflicting, to use literature in ways that are consistent with this philosophical and methodological position of the study. One way in which I addressed this matter is to present Chapter 2 as integration of context before and after the formulation of theory. The logic of this lay in the fact that the context of the study was constantly evolving and the original context was less and less relevant to the final analysis.

### **3.9.3 Conditions and Context: The Intensive Interview**

A primary consideration was that I had constraints on undertaking the prerequisite “intensive interview” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 56). First, the social justice of the study called for emphasis on conceptualisation (3.7.1) which could conflict with focus on the individual. This meant that while I aimed for writing that highlighted the “intensive interview”, it was difficult not to subsume the intentions of this into broader abstract theory. Second, I had the common problem that most participants had limited time for the interview but also the “intensive interview” was constrained because learners often identified that they had concentration issues and needed more time than others to answer questions.

A methodological consideration therefore was strategy to deliver concepts of the intensive interview. I applied the concept of theorising within analysis of the Straussian concept of conditions and context (Strauss, 1987). It followed therefore that I had to be disciplined and to invest a great deal of time in observation, within interview and through memos, to develop context. In addition, I ensured I had plenty of time to observe learning and teaching spaces, interactions of learners and teachers, and other relevant activity. How then to represent evidence in this framework was a complex challenge in the substantive grounded theory (Chapter 5). It is a work of balance between conceptualisation and the attempt to be faithful to the individual voice.

### **3.9.4 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I describe the intellectual puzzle, the philosophical, qualitative, methodological and theoretical perspectives and strategies to implement the theory. I show the developmental intent of the puzzle, written with reference to the social justice dimension of this study and assembled aspects of research methodology that theorise to understand local (Bevir, 2010) social justice and normative human rights as matters of equity in skills policy.

The intellectual puzzle of this study demands “... an invitation to re-interpretation” (Crotty, 1998) and I garnered interdisciplinary research in methodology out of political science (e.g. Bevir), organisation theory (e.g. Clarke) and sociology (e.g. Charmaz, Denzin). I applied emerging conGT as well as emerging ideas about social justice within Charmaz’s methodology. In Crotty’s (1998) terms, constructivist research:

requires that we not remain straitjacketed by the conventional meanings we have been taught to associate with the object. Instead, such research invites us to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning (p. 51).

In Chapter 4, I present the Methods, the flexible guidelines, of conGT as one way of approaching equity in skills policy to open up to new understanding that may inform policy concerned with the equity gap. I draw attention that the guidelines represent practical methods but their linkages with philosophical and theoretical positions in this chapter are close. At times, this means the chapters are overlapping.



# Chapter 4: Methods

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## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter continues the approach of a theory/methods package consistent with the social justice, conGT methodology explained in Chapter 3. To re-cap, conGT is methodology for addressing subjective, multiple realities; it is inductive and iterative (Charmaz, 2014) and although systematic it is not linear, chronological or descriptive. ConGT methods are based on grounded theory guidelines of Glaser and Strauss (1967).

This chapter sets out the methods of the research by presenting:

- representation of methods;
- ethics;
- evolving research design represented in Figure 4.1;
- sources of evidence;
- selection of participants;
- processes for interviews;
- processes of recruitment;
- interviewing;
- grounded theory guidelines; and
- rigour.

The grounded theory guidelines include examples of methods with discussion of how and why I theorised. The discussion is supplemented by Appendix K which provides “examples of analysis” of how codes were formed and theoretically tested. It must be noted that the purpose of Chapter 5 is to further fill in the gaps and the thought style that led to the emergence of the categories and core categories of the substantive grounded theory. Chapters 4 and 5 are integral.

## 4.2 Representation of Methods

The methods fit into the methodology set out in Chapter 3. The methodological challenge includes demonstration of rigour in a study that is subjective. I try to represent in this chapter how I inducted evidence to theorise without forcing data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

I use four tools for representing methods for a subjective study. First, the tool of reflexivity is intrinsic to credible theorising (Charmaz, 2014). I elect to use the “thought style” (Mruck & Mey, 2007, p. 527) (4.2) approach to reflexivity. Second, by including this section, I draw attention to the significance of representation and to signal that I have given it considerable thought. Third, I write about the methods in detail and exemplify how methods were applied to evidence. Fourth, I include diagrams to provide means other than a narrative of seeing how the methods are approached.

The representation of methods in this study attempts to show that grounded theory is more than inductive, qualitative research (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) sets out “compulsory” methods of grounded theory and writes that what grounded theorists “do” is *all, not just part*, of: simultaneous, iterative data collection and analysis; focus on actions and processes rather than themes and structures; constant comparison; developing data for concepts; using systematic analysis for inducting abstract categories; construction not description or application of current theories; theoretical sampling; seeking out variation in studies, categories or process; category development rather than specific empirical topic (p. 15).

I designed the methods recognising that “all is data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 29) although there will be variation in quality. The sources of evidence are consistent with conGT guidelines (Charmaz, 2014) and included: interviews; observations in-interview and with regard to context and conditions; extant material involving legislation and policy documents and a review of international, national and Tasmanian literature; radio and internet material. The methods of the grounded theory guidelines drove the research design such that the design evolved right to the end of the study in ways consistent with conGT (Charmaz, 2014).

I reiterate that I am committed to co-construction of evidence and I see the people whom I interview across learning, teaching and policy-making as interacting in a social manner. This research does not represent organisations as objectivist structures but as a criss-crossing of social relationships among people.

Following affirmation of ethics approval, the evolving research design is set out below.

## 4.3 Ethics

A full ethics application was submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) (HREC) Network approval number H13791, dated 27 May 2014. The learners experiencing disadvantage in this study are deemed vulnerable under the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human*

*Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], Australian Research Council, & Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2013)

## **4.4 Evolving Research Design**

The constantly evolving research was designed to systematically induct empirical evidence to generate substantive grounded theory and formal theory. The evidence aimed to respond to the intellectual puzzle (1.5) (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mason, 2012) and to the primary and evolving research questions (Chapter 1). As predicted by researchers, the design and implementation of grounded theory was about confusion (Glaser, 2012) and messiness (Clarke, 2005). In Figure 4.1, I attempt to represent with two-way arrows the iterative processes of intellectual puzzle and research questions; interviews and observation analysis; use of literature; and the generation of substantive grounded theory and potential formal theory from inducted evidence from the bottom up. This is an attempt to show order in a research process that was highly messy and iterative.

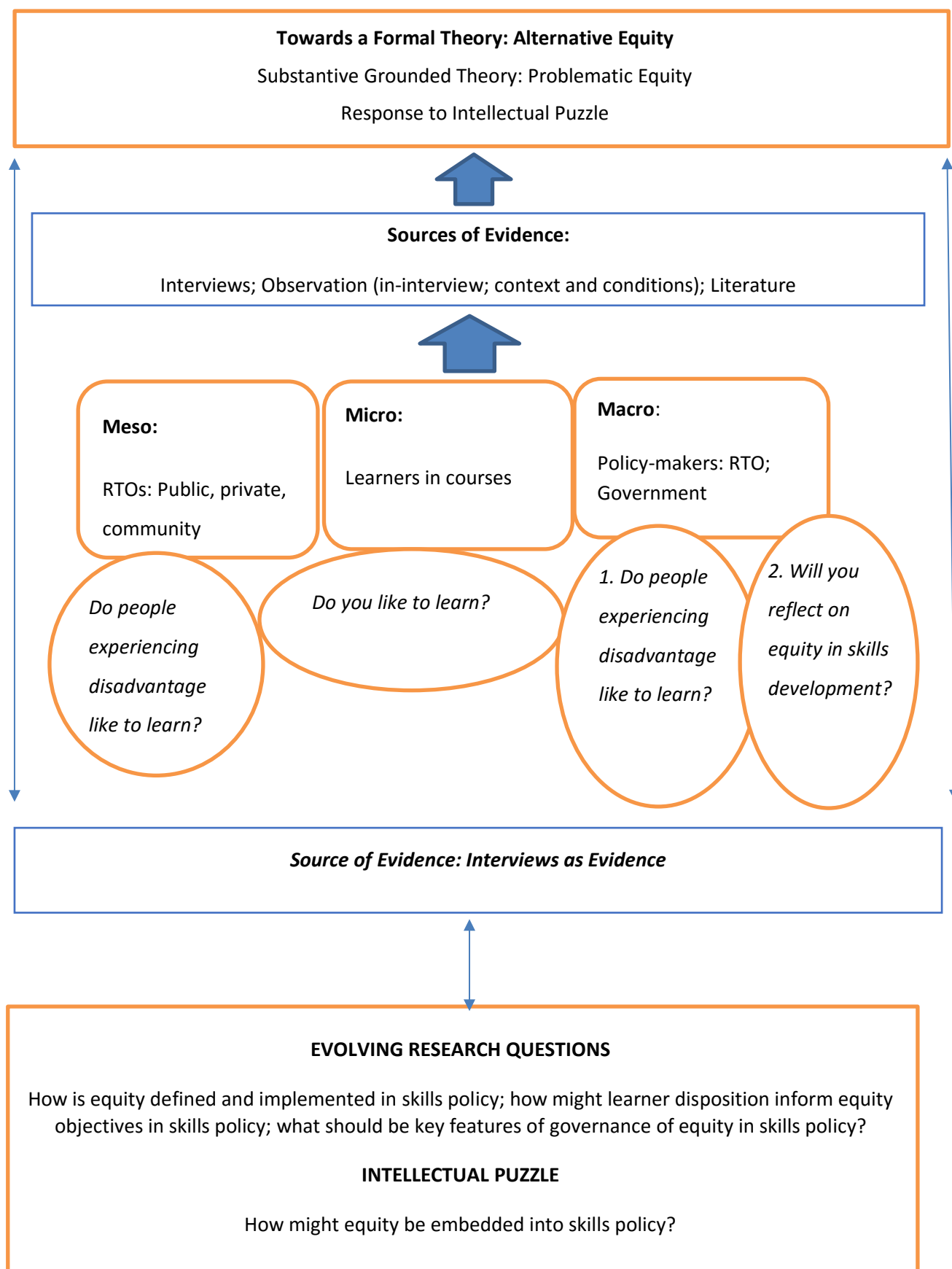


Figure 4.1 Evolving Research Design

I next discuss the foundational sources of evidence as interviews, observations and literature.

## **4.5 Sources of Evidence**

### **4.5.1 Interviews as Evidence**

Grounded theorists, more than other qualitative researchers, use intensive interviewing as the primary method of collecting evidence (Charmaz, 2014). Through the primary source of interviews, I sought empirical evidence to undertake integrated macro, meso and micro theorising. I sought to locate individual experience into broad organisational responses and frameworks (Charmaz, 2014). Recruitment of participants at diverse macro, meso and micro levels of inquiry was necessary because it is “absolutely crucial to figure out who might hold the answer to your research question and how you will open up opportunities to gather information from those in the know” (O’Leary, 2014, p. 181). In this study, the people in the know are learners taking part in equity programs; policy-makers in RTOs and government; and teachers and trainers in public, private and community RTOs. The participants are people from diverse backgrounds and different positions in the skills development hierarchy and people from different sectors of skills provision.

I maintained awareness that the purpose and process of interviewing in the 21st century is at the heart of “confronting the crisis of representation” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 1) (3.5.1.1).

Interviewing is a primary source of evidence which Fontana and Frey (2000) proposed is not and never was neutral. In attempting co-constructed, subjective analysis, I was aware that no longer are interviews defined as “conversations with a purpose” and viewed as a “conduit for transporting experiential knowledge from the respondent, on the one side, to the interviewer ... on the other” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 1). In 21<sup>st</sup> century qualitative research, Fontana and Frey (2000) propose that interviewing is contextual and it has political involvement.

### **4.5.2 Observations as Evidence: In-Interview, Context and Conditions**

Observations are a source of evidence in the research design (Figure 4.1) and take place at two levels. First, there is observation related to interviews. Charmaz (2014) recommends observation as source of evidence and coding of “observations of the setting, scene and participants as well as your interviews” (p. 136). Second, there are the observations of context and conditions. Strauss and Corbin (2014) propose that observation of context and conditions is all-important to good analysis.

Researchers have a duty of observation to ensure that evidence is not vulnerable to misrepresentation, or spin. Strauss and Corbin (2014) propose two correctives: ask oneself all kinds of questions about what is being studied, even seemingly “ludicrous questions” (p. 88); record all odd observations because although apparently irrelevant they may well feed later evidence. I make observations, and code them in ways similar to interviews, with the aim of creating context and conditions as a source of evidence to generate conGT consistent with the social justice lens set out in Chapter 3.

### **4.5.3 Literature as Evidence**

There is historical confusion about whether to acknowledge the influence of the literature in grounded theory. It is now settled that how and when, not whether, to use the literature are the key issues (Dunne, 2011). Charmaz (2014) writes that “a lack of familiarity with relevant literature is unlikely and untenable” (p. 306). Charmaz amplifies the significance of theoretical sensitivity in how to effectively use the literature as setting context and for comparison. Further, the literature is not intended to exhaustively describe the research field but to “fit the specific purpose and argument of his or her report” (p. 307). In this way, grounded theorists use the literature as a “fantastic range of comparison groups” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 179). Evolved grounded theorists may integrate the literature in non-traditional ways throughout the generation of theory.

There is contemporary emphasis on literature as source of evidence. Strauss and Corbin (2014) suggest that researchers too involved with the literature may be constrained and even stifled by it and they advise: “use the literature; don’t let it use you” (p. 49). For Charmaz (2014), the purpose of the literature in conGT is to “assess” and “critique”; it is not to describe, recite key theories and force “data into pre-existing categories” (p. 307). In qualitative research generally, Creswell (2014) points out that the increasing use of induction means that the purpose of the literature changes to a role of comparison. In this study, I use the literature as comparison with empirical evidence and subsequently to set out the context and conditions of the theory.

The next sections deal with selection of participants; processes for interviewing; processes of recruitment; and interviewing.

## **4.6 Selection of Participants**

The selection of participants was based on the annual contested *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009) funded by Skills Tasmania (2009). The program was selected as the only one that

focused on equity, although Skills Tasmania does address issues of participation in VET through a range of programs designed to build workforce skills.

From the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009), I could select participants at micro, meso and macro levels of VET programs which is consistent with conGT. I required empirical evidence from adult learners experiencing disadvantage; teachers and trainers in public, private and community RTOS; and policy-makers in government as well as in private and community RTOs. The intellectual puzzle involved selecting participants from whom I could interpret an “insider view” (Blaikie, 2000, p. 115), with whom I would “co-construct” an understanding of reality (Mills et al., 2006).

The learners in the equity programs funded by Skills Tasmania comprised a population of people socially categorised as:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; people with a disability; people with mental health issues; migrants and humanitarian entrants; prisoners and offenders; women; older men (45 years and over) (Skills Tasmania, 2009, p. 3).

The *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009) provided the foundation for selection of participants for the study. I next explain the process of sampling with regard to participants.

#### **4.6.1 Numerical Sampling and Saturation**

To meet the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network requirements, I predetermined a number for interviews: learners: 20 to 30; teachers and trainers: 5 to 8; policy-makers (government and RTO): 6 to 10.

However, consistent with conGT, I was generating evidence as a way of seeing which did not require preconceptions of sampling and saturation (Charmaz, 2014, p. 108) but shifted focus to whether evidence was “rich” and “sufficient” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 33). Sampling was theoretical and occurred, therefore, towards the end of analysis of evidence and when theorising had begun. This matter is discussed as theoretical sampling later in this chapter.

### **4.7 Processes for Interviews**

The chronological process for preparing and undertaking interviews is set out below:

1. access to Skills Tasmania (2009) list of RTOs delivering equity programs;
2. access to Skills Tasmania list of relevant government policy-makers;
3. letters (including information sheet) of invitation to RTOs;

4. follow-up phone call to RTOs to explain requirements of NVR regulations and standards (Australian Government, 2012), to answer queries and make an appointment;
5. meeting with participating RTOs to determine processes;
6. presentation to learners in classes, with teachers or trainers not present, to explain the study, show and explain consent forms and invitation package, and to invite questions;
7. intermingling with learners when they approached me individually to further discuss the project and, in most cases, to make arrangements for interview;
8. interviews within the learner centre space of learners and of providers, teachers or trainers;
9. interactive time with learners and teachers and trainers in learning centres organised strategically according to theory emerging from initial coding;
10. contemporaneous letters of invitation and interviews with government and RTO policy-makers organised strategically according to theory emerging from interviews;
11. theoretical sampling which involved re-interviewing two government policy-makers on two additional occasions; one public RTO policy-maker on two occasions; two adult learners on one occasion each.

Appendices A to H set out the documentation that accompanied the processes: learners – invitation; learners – information sheet; learners – consent; RTOs – letter of invitation; RTOs, teachers and trainers, policy-makers – information sheet; RTOs, teachers and trainers, policy-makers – consent; letter to confirm arrangements.

## 4.8 Process for Observation

In paragraph 4.5.2, I have explained the importance of observations of context and conditions. Consistent with conGT, I recorded observations as I asked of myself, what is the context? What are the conditions? Context and conditions emerged through observations as I:

- intermingled with learning communities at which I was preparing to interview, as I saw learner and teacher/training interaction;
- sat at the back of classrooms to witness learners' presentations of their work (on 2 occasions);
- took part in a bus trip and in a museum trip with learners and teachers/trainers;
- in interviews with policy-makers in RTOs and government, puzzled at why certain issues were not present in responses e.g. human rights;
- separately recorded observations after each interview in response to the initial coding, and later, the focused coding;



- compared interview transcripts. I found that I especially recorded observations as I compared gerunds in coding.

The context and conditions I recorded included, for example: learners' amazement at learning; teachers/trainers enthusiasm for teaching; emotional responses of RTO and government policy-makers as they reflected on equity in VET. Context and conditions contributed to analysis that learners moved across a process from loving to learn to being amazed by it; that teachers/trainers were committed whether they were in private or public RTOs; and that policy-makers were uncomfortable with government policy.

All memo'ed observations were coded in the same way that interview transcripts were coded (see Appendix K). Coded memos continued to the end of the thesis.

## 4.9 Processes of Recruitment

Skills Tasmania provided lists of the successful applicants for the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* program. The lists contained contact information as well as whether the successful provider was a public, private or community RTO. The title of the RTOs' application indicated: RTO office responsible for the program; which social category was targeted for the program; and the goals of the RTO initiative. Skills Tasmania assisted to locate the appropriate person to contact about the study. Much of the information was in the public domain.

In compliance with University procedure, I had preconceived the numbers and groups of people whom I would interview. Those numbers were: learners: 20 to 30; teachers and trainers: 5 to 8; policy-makers (government and RTO): 6 to 10. Consistent with conGT, I then put aside preconception and interviewed people, and numbers of people, according to how theory was developing and how it could be tested. What mattered in this research was to theoretically test at macro, meso and micro levels of inquiry. The evidence determined that it was best to intermingle interviews with participants who were learners, teachers/trainers and RTO and government policy-makers and to build evidence by comparison of their different evidence. With learners, it emerged that what mattered was whether they were an "equity learner", not whether they might fall into a one of the policy "sub-groups" of "age, gender, cultural or ethnic background, disability, sexuality, language skills, literacy or numeracy level, unemployment, imprisonment or remote location ..." (Australian Government, 2012) (2.4.4). There was no overt attempt to recruit particular numbers or within particular categories although I had to bear in mind that I may be required to explain to the University why I had not recruited the numbers, or categories, agreed in the ethics application. With regard to other participants, I recruited RTO teachers and trainers in the private and public sectors; policy-

makers from RTOs and from government. This strategy was consistent with preconceived numbers required by University systems. The numbers of government policy-makers comprised the pool of people directly responsible for equity in VET.

The process of recruitment developed in tandem with analysis and played out in the following way:

- Entry to field. Usually it was straightforward to establish on each day of interviews a mix of participants. Consistent with conGT, coding began immediately;
- Interviews of up to five participants included some or all of learners, teachers/trainers, RTO policy-makers, government policy-maker. Learners and teachers/trainers were commonly accessible in the one venue. It was possible to make appointments with RTO policy-makers for the same day as learners, and teachers/trainers. The appointments with government policy-makers, often geographically close to RTOs, were made in advance and at a time when I knew I could intersperse with analysis from other interviews;
- Analysis for, usually, two days after each five interviews. Analysis involved clustering and memo'ing, and comparisons across all interviews of initial and gerund coding followed by tentative moves towards focused coding;
- Re-entering field to repeat the above process.

I took the initial coding that I always did immediately after interviews and analysed (coded, clustered, memo'ed) in ways to alert me as to what may be significant and affected by recruitment. Sometimes, that analysis quickly brought forward focused coding; sometimes a category leapt out that stayed the distance of the research; most of the time, there was constant tracking back and forth within interview and observation evidence and, significantly, across macro, meso and micro. I interviewed 45 participants in compliance with preconceived numbers of interviews. The saturation of evidence happened to co-incide with this number. I re-entered the field to re-interview and this process is discussed in theoretical sampling in later sections.

I next discuss the process of recruitment and the profiles of each participant group.

#### **4.9.1 Recruitment of Participants from Registered Training Organisations**

I distinguish institutional and government policy in describing participants by using the terms “institutional policy-maker” and “government policy-maker”. The institutional policy-makers were senior managers who had no ongoing teaching or training role. The term “institutional” distinguishes RTO officers who formulated policy specific to their institution although the term “policy-maker” is not ordinarily used in this way.

I recruited participants from RTOs who became gatekeepers. I then recruited participants who also had a policy/management and no teaching role, teachers who may also have had a mainly management role, trainers and learners. I recruited in an integrated, staged, process. The contact was first by letter and phone and then personal meeting with the agreed gatekeeper in the RTO. The gatekeeper introduced me to teachers and trainers, and learners, in groups so that I could explain the study and distribute written information about it, if required. Each person was provided with opportunity to approach me if they wished to be interviewed in ways that would protect their privacy.

Consistent with conGT, after each stage of letters of invitation, with an information sheet (Appendix A) to RTOs, I assessed responses with reference to induction and emerging theory to determine if change of strategy was required. The criteria to assess responses was based on whether the information I was receiving back was consistent with what I had expected in light of the information I had about the equity programs, e.g. particular social categories were targeted; equity was the focus of the RTO policy. I estimated that eight RTOs would provide the information required in the first stage.

I invited RTOs by letter to nominate a person (i) to have a gatekeeper role and/or (ii) be an interviewee. Those who took part as gatekeepers subsequently facilitated access to learners and to teachers and trainers. It eventuated that all RTOs I contacted nominated a person to be gatekeeper and welcomed the opportunity to be interviewees.

## **4.9.2 Recruitment of Participants from Government Departments**

The induction and theorising informed the process of recruiting and selecting government policy-makers. The process was concurrent with processes for other participants. I invited participation from government policy-makers by letter with an information sheet (Appendix B). The letter provided for a preliminary phone conversation to discuss the project. In all cases, policy-makers responded quickly and all agreed to take part in the study.

## **4.9.3 Profiles of the Participants**

### **4.9.3.1 Learners**

The learners were people experiencing disadvantage according to the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009). I emphasised my ethical duty to providers, teachers and trainers and asked them to help to create a process where confidentiality was maintained in my interactions with learners. For example, I needed a situation where either the interview was not visible to others or

the interview had the appearance of a general conversation. I ensured that I created situations where I was often generally intermingling with potential participants.

I interviewed adult learners from ages 19 to 54 within the categories of physical disability (including intellectual disability), people with mental health issues, humanitarian entrants, women and older people. The learner participants in this research are the groups defined in the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009) not including a specific focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders or prisoners or offenders (Chapter 1).

As interviews proceeded, I aimed to meet with learners across all the social categorisations of the *Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009). This proved not to be straightforward as it was not always evident which social categorisation had been ascribed to an individual learner even though they might be a part of, for example, an intellectual disability group. I had to exercise some of my own judgement as some learners appeared not to know which category was applied to them; it was not a question I thought appropriate to put to them. If I enquired of teachers or trainers, it was possible that I would identify which people were being interviewed.

#### **4.9.3.2 Teachers, Trainers, Policy-Makers (RTO and Government)**

The participants were:

- teachers or trainers from public, private and community RTOs;
- government and RTO policy-makers.

All selected RTOs were regulated by National VET Regulation (NVR) standards (Minister for Industry, 2015). Public RTOs employ “teachers”; private and community RTOs employ “trainers”.

The RTO institutional policy officers were either public or private and some were also undertaking teaching or training. The government policy officers were those directly involved in equity in skills development but distinguished by which state department they represented: in education or in skills development. Skills development policy-makers were those responsible for funding policy.

#### **4.9.4 Participants Interviewed**

I interviewed policy-makers (institutional), learners, teachers and trainers from RTOs; and policy-makers from government departments who were either within education or skills development. The numbers of interviews are as set out in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 below.

**Table 4.1: Interviews: Participant Numbers**

Participant	Number
Learners	25
RTO: (institutional) Public policy-makers	3
RTO: (institutional) Private policy-makers	3
RTO: (institutional) Community policy-maker	1
Teachers: Public	7
Trainers: Private	2
Policy-makers: Government	
Education 2	
Skills 2	4
Total	45

**Table 4.2: Learners by Age and RTO**

Age	19–25	26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	45–55
	15	3	2	-	4	1
RTO	Private	Community	Public			
	11	4	10			

In summary, consistent with conGT, the sample and number of interviews conducted was directly tied to the decision that I had gathered sufficient empirical material to develop analytic categories. I had opened up as much opportunity as possible for constant comparison to expose and deal with inaccuracies, embellishments, minimalist, or deceptive accounts (Charmaz, 2014). At the same time, I was mindful of the advice of Charmaz (2014) to be conscious of numbers to the extent that interviews are central to good theorising and that small numbers may allow *perception* of artificiality. I next discuss the next step in the project: the processes for interviewing.

## 4.10 Interviewing

Consistent with conGT methodology in Chapter 3, I employed the strategy of the “intensive qualitative interview” of conGT (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85). With my professional background, I am much

more inclined to interviewing than is as passive, as unintrusive, as possible; I am trained not to pose preconceived, or leading, questions. I put together the theoretical requirements of seeing people as process and the method of interviewing to look at “... *concerns* at the moment, *justifications* of past actions, and measured *reflections*” [my emphasis] (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85). These three concepts of concern, justification and reflections entered into analysis as a basis for comparison. As well as explicit content, I observed and recorded silences (Charmaz, 2014).

I conducted learner, RTO policy-maker, and teacher/trainer interviews across five different locations, which I refer to as learning centres. Four of the learning centres are in Hobart in southern Tasmania and immediate suburbs; and one learning centre is in Launceston in northern Tasmania. I interviewed government policy officers in Hobart in their offices.

I next address aspects of interviewing with reference to the participant groups: learners; policy-makers (RTO and government); and teachers and trainers. With each participant group, I refer to: consent; context and negotiation; protocols; questions; recording and member checking.

## **4.10.1 Learners**

### **4.10.1.1 Consent**

Consistent with ethics approval, I discussed the project and invited learners to take part in interviews, first in their classroom setting and later individually. When, in individual conversation learners agreed to be interviewed, I discussed the concept of consent and all aspects of it and invited them to orally consent or to sign the consent form. I had made preliminary inquiries of teachers and trainers as to whether there may be learners who could not write and would prefer to consent orally. All learners signed the forms.

### **4.10.1.2 Context and Negotiation**

There were contextual negotiations (Charmaz, 2014) with learners as each was not known to me and there was no sound evidence that the fact of being part of an equity program reflected their actual capability. I selected three rules to interviewing: ensure interactivity, space and time for emergent understandings; do not preconceive content or direction of the interview; the goal is to reflect (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 85, 91, 93).

It was necessary to first engage with learners, to create empathy and trust and to be prepared to adapt to allow them to explore and to allow understandings – theirs and mine - to emerge. It eventuated that all my experiences with learners were positive in that each engaged enthusiastically with the topic of the study whether they decided to be interviewed or not.

#### **4.10.1.3 Protocols**

In this section, I describe arrangements for engaging with learners, venues and counselling services.

The ethics approval required me to ensure that learners had access to counselling if this was required because of interviewing. I raised this matter with each learner but in all cases it was unnecessary to provide details of counselling service available. Each learner knew who the counsellors were and many reported that they had regular consultations with them. This is because standards for VET regulation (Australian Government, 2012) requires that RTOs ensure a service for vulnerable learners who may seek a right to counselling if they require it (Minister for Industry, 2015).

Consistent with ethics approval, I did not interview unless there were assurances of privacy. Most interviews were in a private room in the learning centre. One interview was in a museum café and another al fresco. I had a duty to maintain the anonymity of the learners which included not letting teachers know, or allowing them to deduce, which of the group I interviewed. I reiterated this duty to two teachers who asked who I had interviewed.

#### **4.10.1.4 Questions**

The question to learners was: Do you like to learn? At times there was a follow-up question of: Do you have plans/dreams/aspirations arising from your learning? The interview question to learners sought a subjective, co-constructed understanding of learners and their disposition, or inclination, to learn. I had prepared an interview guide as required by ethics standards (Appendix J) but soon put it aside as I noted its potential to preconceive interview content and force data in ways not consistent with conGT (Charmaz, 2014).

In interviews, the quest for understanding included *whether* (3.9) it was in fact possible to engage with participants as to their inclination to learn and to use conGT to induct a theory of learner disposition. This is consistent with Charmaz (2014) who writes: “Let your research participant set the tone and pace and then mirror what seems comfortable to him or her” (p. 63). The simplicity of the question was designed to respect traditions and situations of participants. I was constantly preoccupied with the perceived and the actual capability of learners and this impinged on all aspects of interviewing. I was unsure if the ascribed social categorisation reflected cognitive capability. I relied heavily on the main strategy to conduct the interviews in “... continuing negotiation of roles and permissions to enquire about matters ...” (Stake, 2010, p. 28).

#### **4.10.1.5 Recording and Member Checking**

Member checking has a different, or additional, role to traditional qualitative research and is an integral part of the interviewing strategy. I used member checking in the sense that Charmaz (2014) described: to “dig deeper to develop a more complete explanation” (p. 210). Usually, the purpose of member checking in qualitative research is much as Creswell (2014) describes, i.e. “... to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate” (p. 201).

My approach to intensive interviewing is heavily influenced by my academic and professional background. I relate strongly to Mieth (1997) who has referred to this as where interpersonal responsibility melds with the “... quality of being with and for the other, not looking at” the other. To be “with” the people I interview, I prize being able to engage through the written word; the only practical way in which I can do this is to transcribe onto the computer during interview. I don’t use this procedure lightly because I know that intensive qualitative interviewing calls for close personal connection (Charmaz, 2014). I type extremely quickly and can keep eye contact with people as I work. An advantage is that I am operating in a policy environment where the written word is important. But it is also because I can: re-read what is on the screen as an alternative to asking further questions which seem to me often to be leading questions in interviews (see Appendix K, ; to give my participants the affirmation that I think everything they say is important and that they can and will contribute in their own words to the thesis. Appendix K. table 4.3(a) in the interview with Naomi, for example, shows how I use re-reading the transcript to promote further thought. A key point is that if any participant had preferred not to do computer transcription I would have audio-recorded or hand-written; there was every support for doing the interview in this way. Policy-makers especially said it was “a good idea”. I discuss in the next section the interviews with the participant group of policy-makers (RTO and government), teachers and trainers.

### **4.10.2 Policy-Makers (RTOs; Government), Teachers and Trainers**

#### **4.10.2.1 Consent**

Consistent with ethics approval, I discussed the project and invited policy-makers, teachers and trainers to take part in interviews. When participants agreed to be interviewed, I discussed the concept of consent and all aspects of it and invited them to sign the consent form.



#### **4.10.2.2 Context and Negotiation**

Interviews with public, private and community RTOs and RTO and government policy-makers, or “elites” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 74), called for awareness different from interviews with learners experiencing disadvantage. I maintained awareness of my own place in the interview as well as that of the interviewee (Charmaz, 2014). I devised a checklist constructed from Charmaz (2014) to interview within a framework of: dynamics of power and professional status of interviewees; gender, race and age; role of participants and what knowledge they would have; willingness to be interviewed; preconceptions about the interview and, perhaps, about me. This called for space and time for understandings to emerge and for reflection which was a word I actively and frequently used to participants.

#### **4.10.2.3 Protocols**

Consistent with the ethics approval for this participant group, the protocols invited participation, provided an information sheet (Appendix B) and a consent form (Appendix F).

#### **4.10.2.4 Questions**

The interview question to teachers, trainers, and RTO and government policy-makers targeted learner disposition as well as broader issues of how equity was part of policy formulation and implementation. The questions were: “Will you reflect on whether you think learners in equity groups like to learn; will you reflect on matters of governance of equity?”

I set out to let participants set the tone and pace in the manner used with learner participants. I relied on the use of the word “reflect”. Charmaz advocates this as a way of meeting participants’ expectations of what will be asked of them in an interview but also as a way of going “beneath the surface of ordinary conversation (to examine) earlier events, views and feeling afresh” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 69). In the event, the tone and pace set by interviewees was generally lively and enthusiastic.

#### **4.10.2.5 Recording and Member Checking**

Similarly to interviews with learners previously described, I used member checking in the sense that Charmaz (2014) described: to “dig deeper to develop a more complete explanation” (p. 210).

Practical advantages were that I could be sure that time-pressed teachers, trainers and policy-makers could engage with editing sometimes as the interview proceeded but more often at the end of the interview. Consistent with ethics approval, participants were afforded the respect of an offer to contact me to later change the content of the transcript if they so wished. None took up that offer.

I now set out the grounded theory guidelines that were the foundation to the analysis of this study.

## **4.11 Grounded Theory Guidelines**

This section of the chapter sets out the guidelines as I undertook them in this study to generate plausible theory consistent with conGT. In conGT, methods are founded in classic grounded theory and are not prescriptive; they are guidelines (Charmaz, 2014). I preface that writing of grounded theory is itself “... method not an after chore” (Glaser, 2012, p. 1). The conGT theorist will need to be vigilant to avoid the “cloak of objectivity” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 305). Such vigilance influences writing strategies. I was grappling with the need to persuade that subjective analysis is not merely conjecture and not “written out of the head” (Glaser, 2012, p. 2).

I next discuss guidelines for analytic analysis in conGT.

### **4.11.1 Guidelines: Common to Classic Grounded Theory (CGT) and Selected for this Study**

In Chapter 3, I introduced guidelines which are *common* to CGT. The guidelines are set out in Figure 4.2 below and are drawn from Figure 1.1 of Charmaz (2014, p. 18). Axial coding is not common to conGT but is used in this study the reasons for which are set out below (4.11.2.3).

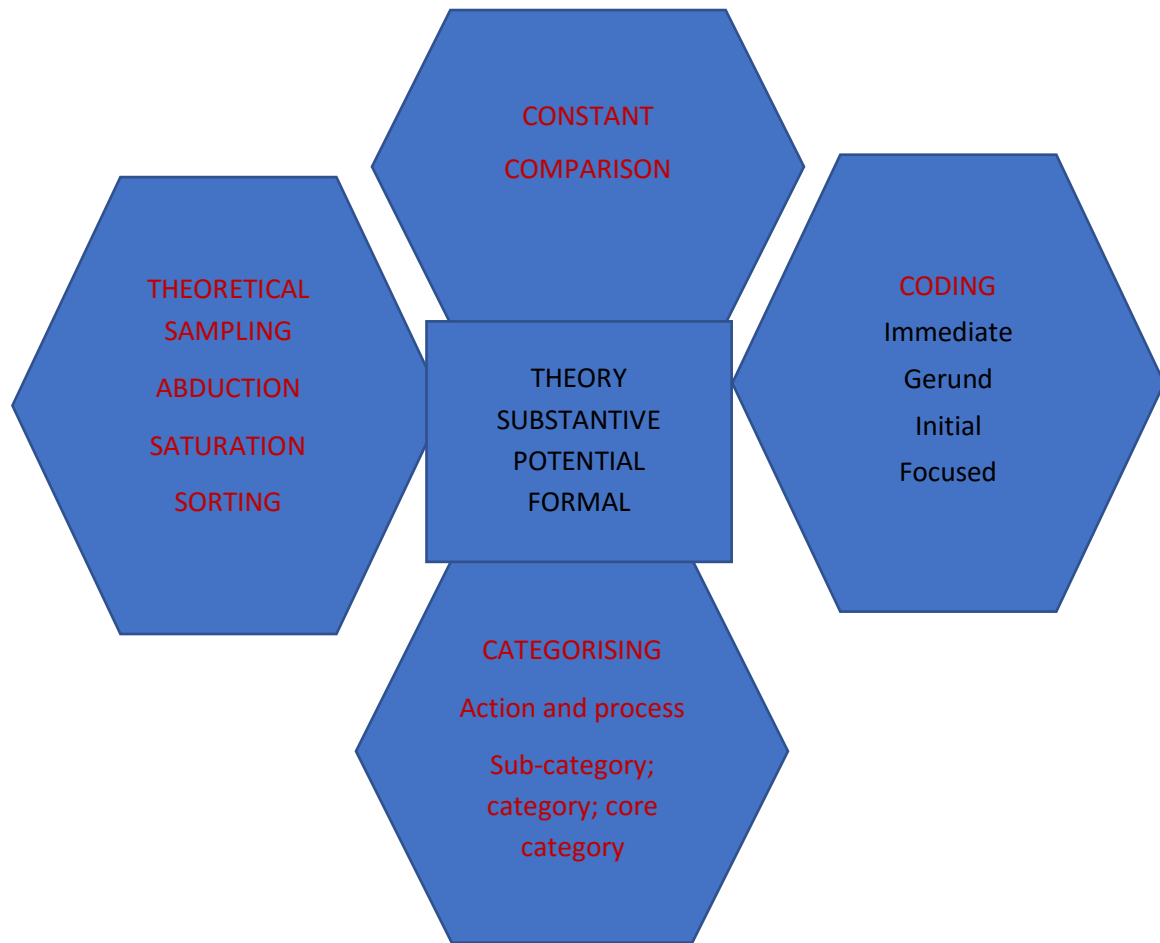


Figure 4.2: ConGT Guidelines

In the following sections I discuss each box of Figure 4.2, reading clockwise from the top so that I begin with coding and end with constant comparison.

### **4.11.2 Coding**

At Appendix K, I have provided samples of initial and focused coding of interviews and coding of researcher observations (Tables 4.3 a, b, c respectively). I draw attention that I colour-coded codes according to their relationship with all levels of inquiry. For example, I did not rely only on a learner interview to theorise that learners love to learn – I compared with what teachers and policy-makers were expressing. This kind of highlighting across macro, meso and micro was a route from initial to focused coding and later to categorisation.

Coding in grounded theory is unique among other qualitative research coding processes (Clarke, 2005). The main distinguishing features of coding are that: coding is initial and then focused (Charmaz, 2014); coding by gerund begins immediately – line by line and segment by segment – and there is very early theorising based on coding, even if provisionally; theories are “sampled” to generate new ways of looking at emergent theory and theoretical codes are “conceptual connectors that develop relationships between categories and their properties” (Mills et al., 2006, p. 5). Charmaz (2014) provides for coding involving all empirical material including silences, “silent dialogues” (p. 93) and observations based on interviews and context and conditions (i.e. from field notes and memos respectively).

All types of coding were applied to all evidence inducted from interviews; coding explored whether people experiencing disadvantage like to learn as much as how participants reflected on governance of equity. In the following section, I discuss initial line-by-line gerund coding; focused coding; and axial coding.

#### **4.11.2.1 Initial Line-by-Line Gerund Coding**

In the grounded theory tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I undertook initial line-by-line gerund coding. As I concentrated intensely on selecting a satisfying gerund, I increasingly found this kind of coding highly analytical which Charmaz (2014) had predicted. Gerunds themselves (e.g. “railing”, “enthusing”, “crying”, “choosing”) were an important part of the comparative process within and across interviews and opened opportunities for “... *seeing* possibilities, *establishing* connections, and *asking* questions” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 244). I coded also in vivo – using the actual words of participants or documents – coding through actions of individuals and to stay close to the language and experiences of participants. In Appendix K (Table 4.3 (a)), I set out brief examples of interview

transcripts which show in the left-hand column the initial coding undertaken very close to the time of the interview.

In coding, I actively sought to analyse with reference to, or comparison with, theoretical perspectives of social justice, symbolic interactionism and pragmatism and situated interpretivism (3.7). I chose to introduce coding into “saying” and “doing” as a way of explore the interactionist aspects of people’s reflections with how they translated to action, or non-action. The purpose of “saying” and “doing” codes crossed over macro, meso and micro levels of inquiry to add rigour to the theorising. I did not code according to “saying” or “doing” but with reference to an initial or focused code, or emerging category. For example, if a learner said they “loved learning” did a teacher or trainer’s experience of “loving teaching” reflect their learners’ positive learning disposition? At Appendix K, Table 4.3(b) sets out samples of gerund line-by-line coding separated into “saying” and “doing” and according to whether the coding applied to learner or another participant group.

#### **4.11.2.2 Focused Coding**

Focused coding requires “... decisions about which initial codes make the most *analytic* sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). It can involve coding initial codes (Charmaz, 2014). I began focused coding based on original coding and aided by the narrative. I then typed, printed and photocopied all codes and placed one copy on each side of the computer. I referred to the hard copy of original line-by-line codes, through a process of marking with a tick and/or a colour code on one hard copy then turning to the other copy and ticking all codes across *all interviews* engaging similar codes. This was an exercise conducted over several hard copies of codes as lists became illegible through constant marking and colour coding.

At Appendix K (Table 4.4), I set out a simplified example of moving from initial, to focused coding and to categories and core categories. Initial coding compared across all participants led to theorising that learners love to learn. Consistent with conGT, comparison with what teachers and trainers were doing tested for inaccuracy or misrepresentation (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). Comparison across all initial codes raised in memo that more than love of learning was being expressed. This eventuated in the focused code of “being amazed”. The combination of *loving to learn* and being amazed (and other categories) led to the (coded) memo’ed observation that the theorising was inconsistent with purported low expectations that employers had of learners. More than that, the theorising was inconsistent with government policy that did not express the value of investing in all certificate levels. The category, an interpretive leap, of “absence of learner disposition” began to hover. I next discuss axial coding which came in the middle of analysis when I began to need to highlight the differences between what were then tentative categories.

#### 4.11.2.3 Axial Coding

In this study, axial coding is designed in terms of *more versus less* (Clarke, 2005). I used it tentatively because of its post-positivist connections and with uncertainty as to whether it was compatible with constructivism. Nonetheless, the singular advantage of axial coding in this study was that it made categories visible in terms of which level of analysis was more, or less, intense, or probative, e.g. was the micro code more than the meso, or the macros. Charmaz (2014) encourages all forms of coding although she relies most on constant comparisons. My experience was that comparison may be more accessible to policy-makers. However, to research from the social justice perspective, I found it extremely useful to use axes based on key concepts, and categories, of the study which were learner disposition and reflections of equity. The axial coding elevated theory above the basic social process. For example, empirical evidence from policy-makers was coded against learners; or government policy-makers were coded against RTO policy-makers. A representation of the axial coding tool is set out below.

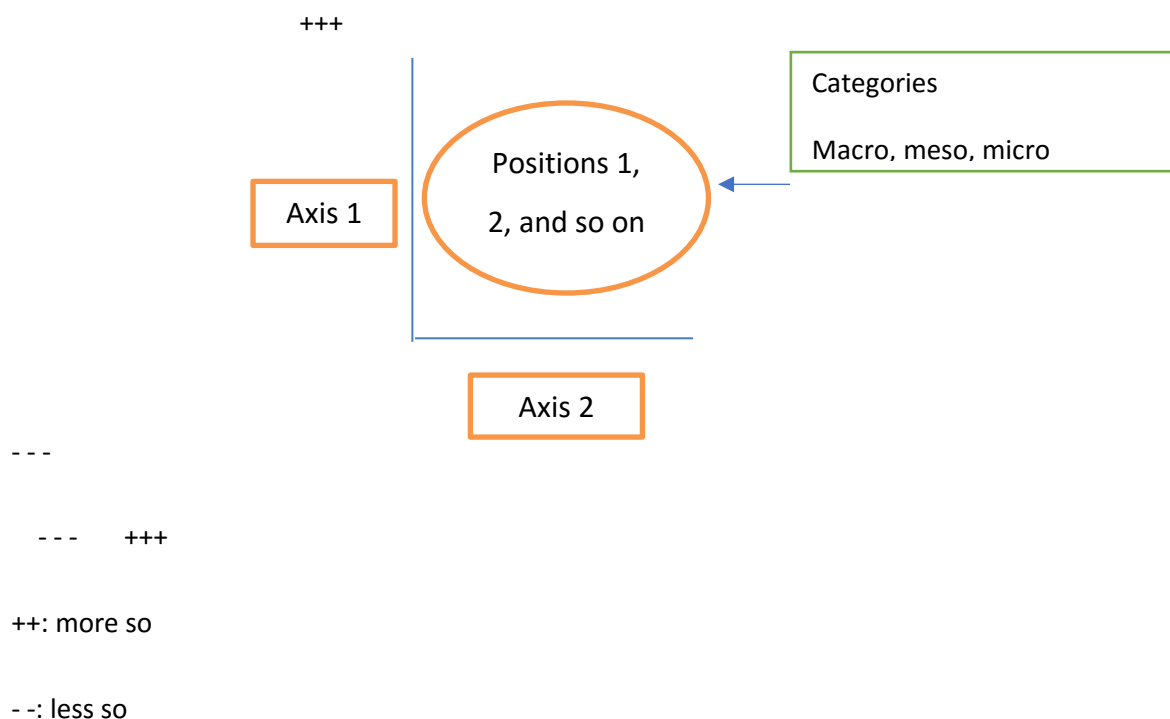


Figure 4.5: Axial Coding

The axial coding clarified the degree of consistency or difference. For example, RTO policy-makers and teachers and trainers shared a view of learners' disposition but gave different emphases to the various properties of that disposition. Or, teachers and trainers gave greater weight than other participants to the amazement that learners experienced because of their improved learning. This axial coding contributed to the theorising of the learner as process. Axial coding provided the extra

theorising that policy focused on productivity had an abnormalising consequence for learners. As Charmaz (2014) points out, axial coding allows properties of categories to be taken apart and re-assembled in different forms in ways that give depth or re-form categories. All of the foregoing coding was allowing emergence of grounded theory to more abstract levels, or core categories, which I next discuss.

### **4.11.3 Categorising**

#### **4.11.3.1 *The Core Category***

In conGT, categorising is constant. Categories engage action and process (Charmaz, 2014) and are a higher level of analysis than themes or patterns; categories give priority to understanding and exploration of possibilities and do not pursue thematic accuracies in data (Charmaz, 2014).

Categorising is the process in conGT that analyses empirical evidence, subsumes themes and presents properties, or core categories, of emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014). In Chapter 3 (p. 101), I draw attention that categorising also involves the lens of the silent blueprint, i.e. silences in interviews and silences observed in memos.

Identifying the core category implicates two key tenets of grounded theory. First, categories are a function of theorising rather than of description. Second, categories are a function of intense scrutiny of inducted evidence which relegates ideas of whether numbers of interviews are relevant to a much lower order. Glaser (1978) states that “it always happens that a category will emerge from among many and ‘core out’ of its own accord” (p. 95). That is, it is the number of codes that are important, not the number of interviews. On the other hand, Charmaz (2014) points out that interviews have value for forming and informing core categories especially if they are controversial, surprising or complex. Charmaz (2014) argues that a different perspective is to revisit whether interviews are the only and best source of evidence and whether sufficient account is taken of observation, archival, and documentary research.

I found that all the Glaser and Charmaz positions applied in this study although I am deeply conscious of the objectivist and subjective differences between the two and what this may mean for induction of evidence. The category of “absence of learner disposition” (Chapter 5) was an example of one that seemed to me to have “cored out” from many codes from a small number of interviews. The sub-category of “loving to learn” was surprising and I found that I did include numbers of interviews in the testing of the theory. I did learn throughout the study that I had under-rated observation (of context and conditions in memos) and relied heavily on revisiting these when taking theorising to higher, abstract levels. A specific example of this was theorising “teaching dilemma” (Chapter 5) as

resting on issues of normalising and abnormalising of the learner experience. The “teaching dilemma” might have arisen from other theorising (e.g. conflict with productivity goals) but constant comparison, coding and then observation gave the greatest weight to what was happening with learners.

In grounded theory, categories are constantly compared in similar ways to those in which codes are compared. In micro, meso and macro levels of theorising, my experience was that at times comparison of categories did not necessarily illuminate a core category because evidence across all levels of inquiry compared very closely. For example, there were situations when comparisons across evidence of government and RTO policy-makers were very close to that of teachers and trainers: the issues of importance to one set of participants seemed of equal importance to another. It was then that I elected to return to axial coding. During the time of coding, I was writing an abundance of memos – perhaps with greater intensity than during any other part of the research. I next discuss memos and diagrams.

#### **4.11.3.2 *Memos/Diagrams***

Memos, often with diagrams, are a distinctive methodological feature of grounded theory (Mills et al., 2006). Charmaz (2014) writes that memos create “... an interactive space for conversing with yourself about your data, codes, ideas, and hunches. Questions arise. New ideas occur ...” (2014, p. 163). I was initially clumsy with memos and advanced the process when I organised into frameworks. One framework was Charmaz’s concerns, justifications and reflections which I had used in interviews (Charmaz, 2014). The three organising terms in memos grounded analysis of empirical material. For example, I compared concerns about the future of learners, teachers and trainers and policy-makers; I teased out justifications of policy-makers for why the equity system continued to show an equity gap; I explored differences of all participants to find unexpected emerging material about the commonality of reflections of teachers and trainers and policy-makers where I had anticipated stark differences. The anchors of concerns, justifications and reflections became incisive analytical tools.

An additional framework for organising memos involved: observations; actualising; confusions; and big ideas arising. It eventuated that the observation memos became a source of evidence and were coded and compared as an integral part of the analysis. The actualising memos increasingly focused on defining categories and ultimately comprised about 40,000 words and 20 diagrams. Actualising memos were essential tools and addressed the secondary sometimes compelling need to write the thesis although it was far too early to begin doing so. The confusion memos always began with the question: What exactly is the confusion? This caused me to probe whether origins of the confusion



were about the actual issue arising or about my response to it. I might, for example, find that my response to the question was “Because it is counter-intuitive” which was a marvellous reminder to interrogate my own assumptions. The confusion then was analysed in terms of why I found the matter counter-intuitive rather than based on the substance of the issue itself. The big ideas arising from memos were those that were most often diagrams, or clusters. Often, they were short, cryptic, unresolved, and very frequently expanded over the course of the study. Observation memos were those most frequently revisited, added to, and expanded. These memos contributed always in a highly iterative way, to the bases for theoretical sampling, abduction, saturation and sorting which processes I next discuss.

#### **4.11.4 Theoretical Sampling, Abduction, Saturation and Sorting**

Theoretical sampling, saturation and sorting in conGT are essential concepts; abduction is an additional concept that may not necessarily be essential. These concepts have functions different to, or not usual in, qualitative research. I discuss each of these four methods below.

##### **4.11.4.1 *Theoretical Sampling***

Theoretical sampling is a necessity for undertaking grounded theory although it is often overlooked (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) writes “Initial sampling in grounded theory gets you started; theoretical sampling guides where you go” (p. 197). The aim of theoretical sampling is to “... *saturate* your categories with data and subsequently *sort* and/or diagram them to integrate your emerging theory” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 192). Theoretical sampling does not occur to address initial research questions, to reflect population distributions, to find negative cases or to determine that no new data are emerging.

I needed a conceptual framework for theoretical sampling and selected the guidance of Charmaz (2014). The conceptual model was: “theoretical plausibility, direction, centrality and adequacy” (p. 87) and I kept these words in front of me during the process of sampling theory. I began to organise theoretical sampling at the point where the data, coding and memo’ing had produced tentative focused codes that could equally be categories. I then used various strategies of theoretical sampling which Charmaz (2014) writes can entail “... studying documents, conducting observations, or participating in new social worlds as well as interviewing or re-interviewing with a focus on your theoretical categories” (p. 206). I was interested to note that it was the “plausible” question that figured the most in the theoretical sampling. I was constantly asking myself of a theory: is this plausible? There were several occasions when although my intuitive answer was “no”, the evidence said otherwise.

The strategies that I used for theoretical sampling were re-interviewing and observations. Theoretical testing to some degree was circumscribed by the contingencies of access to people, especially learners, because they were too busy, in another place or not interested and Charmaz (2014) alerts us to this potential problem. I therefore dwelt at length on what I needed from theoretical testing and determined that it was to re-interview people who spoke not only from their own position but also with regard to the broader aspects of equity in VET. I re-interviewed three policy-makers, two teachers and one learner. For interview, I took with me the lists of codes and categories I wished to discuss (see Appendix K). I placed the list in front of each person and encouraged them to reflect, or to “think aloud”, about their reactions.

The process of theoretical sampling caused me to position in the substantive grounded theory (5.2) the category as “loving to learn *and*”. Subsequently, the category cascaded into other categories of “accommodating terror” and “being amazed”. Significantly, my approach to theoretical sampling, also drove emerging categories in the basic social organisational problem of “silent voices”. Beyond these category changes, the interviewed informed the properties of the theory which are set out in Chapter 5.

#### **4.11.4.2 Abduction**

It is difficult to pin down definitions of abduction, how to abduct, and what is its purpose. A definition might include that a researcher *inducts* evidence and then *abducts* by asking the “what-if” question (Neuman, 2003, p. 112). In conGT, abduction is part of the pragmatist theoretical perspective and is inherent in the process of *inferring* to make meaning. The process of abduction involves: seeing inducted evidence in a surprising new way; scrutinising, hypothesising and testing to confirm or disconfirm possible explanations; creating a new theory, or organising extant theories in a novel way (Charmaz, 2014, p. 201, p. 341). Abduction is also *imaginative* reasoning which remains grounded in induction and empirical analysis. Reichertz (2007) proposes that abduction was present but not systemised in classic grounded theory although Strauss, with Corbin, became more and more abductive (p. 215). Reichertz points out that abduction can be risky because it is an intellectual exercise that takes one away from the conventional view of things. However, abduction does require a researcher to induce situations (p. 221), perhaps by taking distance from analysis and even daydreaming. In this way, it may not be logically ordered or an exact method. However, Reichertz (2007) contends that abduction does question previously developed knowledge and it does produce new knowledge by taking data very seriously.

I was well into theoretical sampling before forming a systematic analysis from which I felt confident to abduct. Abduction, the “inferential leap” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 200) then caused a major return to

the analysis that had gone before. Abduction took me back to review the nature of my own axiology and caused me to represent and rewrite social justice in philosophical terms as well as theoretical perspective. Abduction was especially useful in connecting disciplines in this interdisciplinary study. I abducted when I realised that some concepts in disciplines that appeared different were very similar or the same. The most notable abduction involved hypothesis about the meaning of “traditions and dilemmas” in political science with reference to concepts of “*habitus*” in philosophy and “learner disposition” in education. This abduction led to a significant breakthrough in the categorising in the substantive grounded theory of “absence of learner disposition” and was one device that opened up new theorising for the potential formal theory.

#### **4.11.4.3 Saturation**

Saturation is one of the purposes of theoretical sampling to help delineate the properties of a category and to clarify relationships between emerging categories (Charmaz, 2014, p. 212).

Saturation is not repetition of empirical evidence. The adept grounded theorist may generate theory on small numbers which is superior to theory generated by other researchers bounded by using large numbers (Glaser, 2001). Among grounded theorists, the debate is not about saturation through numbers but more about “theoretical sufficiency” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 215). This gives rise to how does one prove saturation in grounded theory when it is a subjective determination.

Charmaz (2014) suggests that the solution lies in using grounded theory guidelines to “... give *you* a handle on the material, not a machine that does the work for you” (p. 216). I determined that I had reached saturation when no new theory began to emerge and when I was satisfied that my categories were genuinely expressing the information raised before theoretical testing.

#### **4.11.4.4 Sorting**

Sorting in grounded theory is a strategy to serve the purpose of theorising and will include systematic diagramming and integrating – of which I did a great deal from the beginning of fieldwork. Charmaz (2014) suggests that sorting in grounded theory is different from the processes of other qualitative research because it is the framework for the theoretical guidelines of memos and clustering.

I sorted by extracting printed copies of memo’ed and coded observations and categories – on a desk. I stood back and looked at it, and wrote on butcher’s paper and a whiteboard to cluster what I was seeing. I would return to the computer and diagram again. When the first major categories emerged, I began to sort by sketching the thesis contents page and to outline chapters. But I wrote as an analyst for many drafts; I did not undertake final thesis writing until much later.

#### **4.11.4.5 Clustering**

Constant clustering is a method of conGT although clustering is generally used in qualitative research. Clustering that is constant and involves “playing” with ideas” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 184). Clustering provides an “image of how your topic fits together” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 184). Clustering is a form of mind-mapping involving circling and linking multiple although potentially connected thoughts. I clustered using “boxes” drawing on: concepts, especially . productivity, learner disposition; memos, especially those I categorised as “big ideas arising”; gerunds, especially when I wanted to compare these across macro, meso and micro levels of inquiry e.g. “regretting”, “loving”; emerging categories, especially when I was beginning to move tentative categories, and later sub-categories, towards core categories. I constantly clustered by hand or on the computer and most often on butcher’s paper.

Clustering allowed for free-wheeling expression and organising of ideas. One of the concepts most subjected to clustering was “emotion”. I explored multiple aspects of emotion from each participant group. In the first instance, the clustering was around “emotion”; then it was among apparently unconnected ideas such as policy-makers remembering the past, or teachers and trainers loving their work. The various clusters were eventually subjected to comparison and from there began to emerge properties and ultimately sub-categories of the substantive grounded theory (Chapter 5.) Constant clustering drove the theorising a great deal.

#### **4.11.5 Constant Comparison**

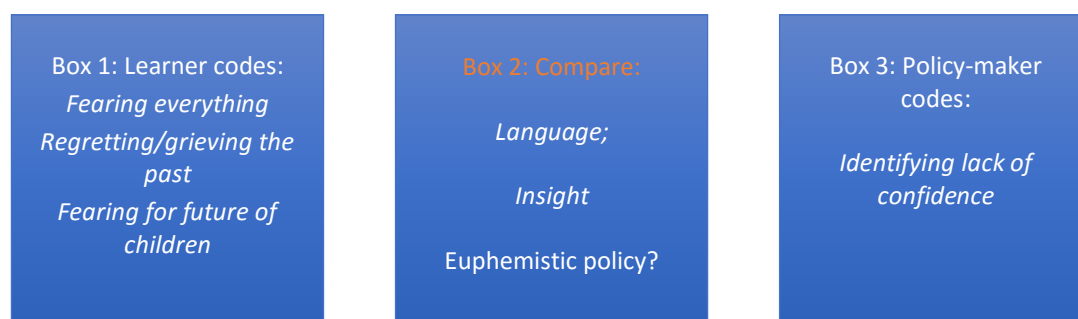
Constant comparison is the cornerstone to traditional grounded theory and to conGT. If the researcher’s philosophical position recognises multiple realities, there must follow a commitment to constant comparison to make numerous realities visible (Charmaz, 2014). The constant comparison method compares everything with everything: data with data, data with code, code with category and so on (Charmaz, 2014).

I suggest that a significant contribution of this research is to show that comparison across macro, meso and micro levels of inquiry is a way of situating interpretation of evidence e.g. the micro within the macro, or the meso; or the meso within the macro. The contribution shows that macro, meso and micro interact with one another; each informs the other by comparing similarly or differently and makes analysis rigorous. Constant comparison is subjective and is a key to developing theoretical sensitivity. Constant comparison helps to identify where one has pre-judged or assumed; it provides the process for seeing the world through the eyes of participants and “... understanding the logic of their experience ...” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 133). Constant comparison micro-analyses empirical evidence

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and shifts obdurate codes into categories and theory. Constant comparison encourages interrogation of silences and invisibles (Star, 1995) all with a focus on analysis and theory generation.

I began comparison on the first day of interviews and came to realise that interspersing learners, teachers and trainers and policy-maker interviews, is its own form of theoretical testing. For example, if I interviewed a learner one day, I could theoretically test with interviews with teachers the following day. I compared the internal statements of, for example, a learner interview each with the other. The following day, I had a with a heightened sense of how to situate my interpretation when I interviewed a teacher, or a policy-maker. I compared gerund codes freely and in an open-ended way.

Consistent with conGT, the analysis took “interpretive leaps” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 200) because of constant comparison in two ways. First, new theory emerged when comparison began to be practicable with reference to the *relations* between codes and emerging theory. I hand-wrote a comparison chart with separate boxes with, for example, initial codes of learners and policy-makers in the two outer boxes and with a blank box in between to highlight the relations between each group. The middle box was often the focus of intense concentration. A small example of the process is set out below (Figure 4.3). Boxes 1 and 3 represent the first comparisons of initial codes while Box 2 records the interpretive leap towards properties that would ultimately lead to focused coding and categories. The language of learners was expressive of deep feeling; the policy-makers’ interpretation was distant and objective. The interpretive leap was a view of policy as euphemistic as it used language which glossed over the lived experience of learners experiencing disadvantage.



**Figure 4.3: Comparisons**

Second, new theory emerged quickly when categories were developed and compared with the literature to which theorising had either led me or which had appeared in the perusal of new publications. Constant comparison of the categories of the substantive grounded theory frequently

led to comparison of the literature in different disciplines. For example, one single category led into sociology readings about representing the “other”; educational readings about “self-capitalisation” and transition of learners; political science readings and public administration readings about new public management and new public governance. Consistent with conGT, out of the process of constant comparison, I began on a path towards a potential formal theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 343).

In the final section, I set out the approach to rigour in this study.

## 4.12 Rigour

In the name of rigour, in this study I laboured over three concepts in theory and in practice. First, in Chapter 3, I conjoined discussion of subjectivity with reflexivity to show that rigour in conGT is dependent on reflexivity (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003; Darawsheh, 2014). Charmaz (2006) writes that it is reflexivity that grounds and justifies the research and its theory. Second, I used the Charmaz (2014) concept which is that rigour comes with consistency in philosophy, methodology and methods. I constantly referred to recognition of multiple realities to create a flexible methodology. In methods, for consistency, I relied especially on constant comparison. Third, because I made a priority of using methodology that was user friendly to policy-makers, I used cross-disciplinary methods to represent symbols and language that I present as more likely to already be in the public sector domain or to be more acceptable. I base these choices on my thirty years of experience as a bureaucrat (most of which was in the New Public Management paradigm), where it was my job to focus on symbols and language of public administration. I crossed disciplines (see Chapters 5 and 6), heeding Madison’s (2011) exhortation for researchers to pursue intersections between theory, fieldwork methods and critical practice. I sought out discussions of constructivism by political scientists, public policy theorists and organisational theorists (Hay, 2011; McAnulla, 2006; Rhodes, 2007).

The rigour of the analysis in this study is founded on the systematic emphasis with all the characteristics of grounded theory defined by Charmaz (2014) on constant iteration and comparison within and across all sources of empirical material (Figures 4.1 and 4.2) at micro, meso and macro levels of theory. Figure 4.1 shows methods but I attempted also to show the intense process of constant comparison and reiteration – it was never-ending. Especially but not only in interviews, comparison and iterative analysis set up as much opportunity as possible to go to issues of trust, to expose and deal with inaccuracies, embellishments, minimalist, or deceptive accounts (Charmaz, 2014).

I worked also with a checklist for ensuring “rigour” which draws from Strauss and Corbin (2014, p. 351). I am conscious of the sometime post-positivist position of Strauss and Corbin but I do not see that their checklist for rigour is incompatible with the constructivism of Charmaz. I take the risk in light of my preference to discuss rigour in terms that policy-makers may find will fit and work with their tasks. Table 4.4 below is the checklist with my responses.

**Table 4.4: Checklist for Rigour Additional to Reflexivity and Philosophical Consistency**

Checklist	Response
Did the target sample involve multiple comparative groups?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The study involves learners in equity programs. The target sample of learners and other participants were drawn from participants in five learner centres.</li> <li>2. All participants were from diverse training organisations: public; private; community.</li> </ol>
Multiple sources of data	<p>Interviews: micro; meso; macro</p> <p>Observation</p> <p>Documentation: policy; legislation; interdisciplinary</p> <p>Literature: international; national</p>
<p>Concepts driven by data collection (not literature);</p> <p>Change of research design</p>	The research design evolved during and after data collection. Literature review and literature comparison followed generation of theory. The final design came late in the analysis influenced by literature comparison.
Theoretical sampling, with description	Re- interviews; observation; (Chapter 4).
Researcher sensitivity	Dealt with in theory (Chapter 3); evidenced in empirical data collection (Chapter 5).
Are there negative cases?	There was constant exploration for negative cases, e.g. see Chapter 5 and Preliminary Sampling which focuses on enquiring into negative cases among learners experiencing disadvantage.
<p>Descriptions of coding and methods?</p> <p>Core category, with explanation, and diagram?</p> <p>Are methodological decisions clear?</p>	<p>Chapter 4</p> <p>Chapter 5</p> <p>Chapter 3</p>



## 4.13 Chapter Summary

This chapter describes the approach to methodology and methods as a package to address the intellectual puzzle. In Figures 4.1 and 4.2, I set out key elements of research design and methodology together with the conGT methods, or guidelines. I affirm ethics approval and address: evolving research design; sources of evidence; selection of participants; process of recruitment; processes for interviews; interviewing; and grounded theory guidelines. I exemplify approaches to achieve rigour. I attempted to give insight into the concern of the study to deeply analyse methods as the tools to generate plausible substantive grounded theory and potential formal theory which comprise the following Chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

# Chapter 5: The Substantive Grounded Theory: Problematic Equity

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## 5.1 Introduction

The substantive grounded theory of “problematic equity” emerges from empirical evidence based on interviews and observation with methodology and methods of Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. Consistent with conGT, the empirical evidence is privileged over other sources of evidence. This chapter presents empirical evidence only. The chapter builds on coding and comparisons (some examples of which are at Appendix K) introduced in Chapter 4 to uncover why I arrived at the categories and categories of the substantive grounded theory. The headings in this chapter are properties of evidence and codes that were the foundation to the theory. This chapter does not engage with the literature unless it is methodological. Concepts arising in the empirical evidence are drawn out in Chapter 6, or are explained in the Glossary of Terms.

This chapter presents:

- representation of substantive grounded theory;
- the substantive grounded theory of problematic equity in Figure 5.1;
- the core categories which emerged from evidence at macro, micro and meso levels of inquiry i.e. within policy, learning and teaching; and
- “observations and symbolic interaction” to theoretically interpret the substantive grounded theory.

In the core category of “learning”, there is interpretation, and diagrams, to theorise learner disposition from interviews and observation.

## 5.2 Representation of Substantive Grounded Theory

The substantive grounded theory is a theoretical representation, or a slice, of a delimited study in an area (3.8.1.1) of research. “Problematic equity” is a slice of theory about equity in skills policy based on empirical evidence acknowledged as provisional and located in its own space and time (Charmaz, 2014).

Representation of the substantive grounded theory was challenging. First, consistent with conGT, I had to ground theory in context (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). I did this by presenting context before and after theory was formed in Chapter 2. Second, I had to explain concepts while still maintaining the visibility of each participant (Charmaz, 2014). My experience suggests that this is especially challenging when juggling individual experience as well as macro, meso and micro conceptual analysis. In the absence of guidance from the literature, I chose to extend the use of participants' direct words into the literature comparison in Chapter 6 to reinforce the links with other sources of evidence. Third, I had to find a way to represent, to weave, the different levels of analysis with reference to the theory in a way that was clear and easily understood. I used diagrams as much as possible to aid the process.

I adapted Williams's (2012) diagram to represent the substantive grounded theory and built on it to also situate interpretation of the learner within core categories relating to policy and teaching (Figure 5.1). The substantive grounded is set out in Figure 5.1. and is theory is comprised of core categories of: absence of policy insight; absence of learner disposition; and teaching dilemma. The core categories are located in the centre. The outer rings represent the: properties of the core category with respect to absence of policy insight; and the categories of the core category of absence of learner disposition and teaching dilemma. "Properties" are "defining characteristics ... of a category or concept as ascertained from the researcher's study and analysis..." Charmaz, 2014, p. 344). The properties for example, of "absence of policy insight" therefore are "productivity; industry demand; human rights; equity".

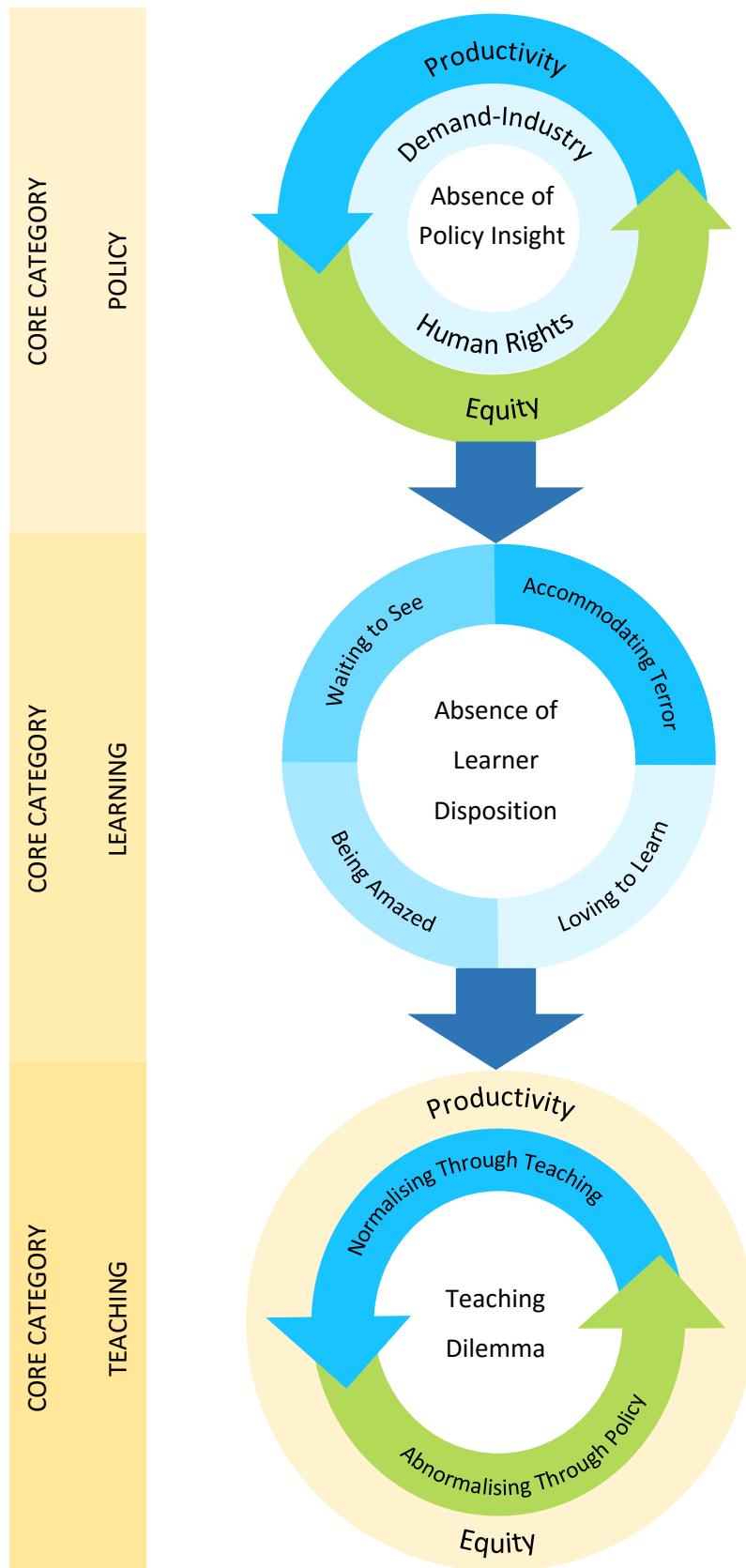
Consistent with conGT, methodology and methods are based on systematic constant comparison and iterative analysis of the empirical evidence (Chapters 3 and 4). It follows that, for example, a single statement, initial or focused code may have meaning across all categories and appear more than once in analysis. A significant outcome of this approach is that from the analysis of the micro and meso theorising of each category, there emerged the interaction of all three which drove macro levels of theorising. Without the interactions of categories, higher levels of abstraction would not have emerged. The theoretical perspectives came strongly into play after coding of interviews and as I began to formulate the substantive grounded theory. I next explain the way in which I theorised within the theoretical perspectives.

### **5.2.1 Social Justice, Symbolic Interactionism and Pragmatism, Situated Interpretivism**

I drew on theoretical perspectives of social justice, symbolic interactionism and pragmatism (3.7) Symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2014) is the predominant theoretical perspective in developing the substantive grounded theory. Symbolic interactionism begins with the symbols that arise from each individual's interpretation of the world. Interactionism is the process by which people draw on their symbols and their engagement with others, make their interpretations of reality, and then decide how to behave (3.7.2). Throughout the substantive grounded theory, I draw symbols out of the coding, and focus on interaction with symbols and language.

Situated interpretation intersects with symbolic interactionism. When I interpreted the stories, and symbols, of individuals, I did so to situate the interpretation into broader social and organisational situations, or realities. When I theorised about, for example, issues of public administration and policy analysis, the theorising was undertaken with reference to its situation and to symbols that emerged from coding. The substantive grounded theory is a provisional interpretation and must be read with reference to context and conditions (Chapters 2 and 3).

The substantive grounded theory is "problematic equity". The term is intended to represent the core categories; it is not a category of itself. "Problematic equity" is represented in integrated form in Figure 5.1. I discuss each core category and category which lies within the inner and outer rings respectively.



**Figure 5.1: The Substantive Grounded Theory: Problematic Equity.**  
 Source of model design: (Charmaz 2014; Williams 2012)

The method used to identify each category of participant (Chapter 4) is:

- learner: lnrr
- teacher and trainer: trnr
- government policy-maker: pmkr1
- policy-maker in private or community RTO: pmkr2
  - as private and community RTOs did not show discernible differences in analysis of evidence or theorising, pmkr2 is ascribed to policy-makers from both private and community RTOs to distinguish them from government policy-makers.

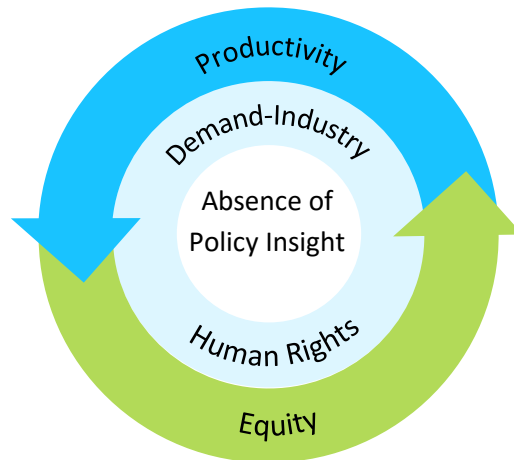
### **5.3 Core Category: Absence of Policy Insight**

The core category of “absence of policy insight” emerged as participants’ preoccupation and frustration that equity objectives for learners experiencing disadvantage clash with government policy that is dominated by industry demand for skills. Participants are concerned that there is absence of policy insight into how equity objectives can be fulfilled.

Within the multiple memos, I explored symbols and interactions emerging through theorising. Tony (pmkr2) had referred to the symbol of the “silver spoon” approach of skills policy and viewed these as undermining principles of equity. In this, he was sharing the lament of Len (pmkr2) that publicity around RTOs tended to “... create symbols of affluence” that were not a realistic reflection of what learners experiencing disadvantage might achieve. I interpreted from Tony and Len that learners interacted with the symbols and were either demoralised by the apparently unattainable or built false expectations that work might be available in the future. Further, Tony argued that the symbols were not representing opportunities for entrepreneurship or creating one’s own job. Both the presence and absence of symbols set up patterns of interaction or non-interaction that were not supportive of equity principles of fairness and inclusion.

I built on the “silver spoon” and other focused codes to chart the theorising of the core category of “absence of policy insight”. It was notable at the outset that the gerunds of the coding all suggested an absence or a silence in the ways that participants were trying to make meaning of equity.

Significant codes were: advocating strongly for more learner demand; casting about for definitions; rejecting (emphatically) social categorisation; searching for group capital and for networks; mulling over equity groups; creating viable reality bringing forth traditions and dilemmas; yearning for public value; seeking highways to change. The theory that emerged from the focused coding was absence of policy insight. Absence of policy insight is depicted in Figure 5.2 below.



**Figure 5.2: Absence of Policy Insight**

The properties of the coding comprised: multiple discourses of equity and productivity including considerations of public value; social categorisation including consideration of group capital and mainstream networks; the real equity groups; creating viable reality; traditions and dilemmas; highways to change. I explore each of these concepts below and sum up with “absence of insight at multiple levels”.

### **5.3.1 Multiple Discourses of Equity, Productivity and Public Value**

Pat (pmkr1) and Len (pmkr1) said “We only sort of know what is meant by governance of equity. We talk about mainstreaming ‘equity’ but we all talk about it in different ways”. Pat (pmkr1) argued similarly that policy discourses are about processes but progress is stymied without broader discourses of what comprises equity. Billy (pmkr1) opined that there are too many discourses about VET equity and productivity: “There are discourses for each – each has stakeholders, histories, objectives” and that this meant that there were many “untested and competing assumptions” about VET equity. Billy shared a view put by many that there is confusion about fundamental matters relating to equity in skills policy. He said:

Broadly I think the way you could consider equity and skills is that there are five different discourses: academic – OECD; national, bureaucratic influenced by the academic but not only; politics; state-level discourses; program-level set of discourses even within (the government funding body) (Billy, pmkr1).

Referring to equity and productivity objectives, Billy’s (pmkr1) statement was that “This is where politics and policy collide” and added that he was uncertain whether equity was “a feared policy

position or a program problem, or both". Billy, and many others, emphasised that it was not "productivity" that was so much the problem as the policy emphasis on industry demand for skills, for jobs that were either non-existent or not likely to exist in the future. This was the beginning of interpretation of the core category as the nexus of equity and productivity, and of industry demand for skills.

Beginning to cluster and code around the "nexus" of equity and productivity, I analysed codes that would point to why productivity objectives were a problem for learners experiencing disadvantage. Ray (trnr) emotionally lamented that objectives of productivity for skills development were not serving learners' needs. Ray said:

The ones doing our courses really do want a job; they want to earn money; they want to socialise. There are those incapable of getting a job or learning but we should be able to offer some social inclusion and volunteering" (Ray, trnr).

Ray expressed a *prima facie* view that allowed inference from other participants that all learners should be getting something out of skills development policy but that may not necessarily be productivity to meet industry demand for skills. Pat (pmkr1) said:

I have never felt comfortable with how we describe equity ... so I am trying to look around and to ask: what are we really doing? What does VET equity really mean? I don't think we have a real meaning for it ... we don't know how to talk about equity" (Pat, pmkr1).

The essence of the nexus emerged as Ray (pmkr2) and Pat (pmkr1) expressed what many participants appeared to be alluding to. First, the present government policy positions are not adequately expressing what equity is or should be. Second, the present government policy positions on equity should be broader than skills for jobs and productivity and inclusive of more learners experiencing disadvantage as well as of outcomes such as contribution to the volunteering sector. Constant context and conditions memos showed that public, private and community policy-makers showed little variation in reporting; that the industry model of skills development did not recognise the positive learner disposition (Alex, pmkr2; Taylor, trnr; Len, pmkr1) or the potential for learners to develop their skills. Further, the industry-demand focus does not deliver policy which will meet industry, let alone learner, demand for skills.

While participants were arguing against the apparent policy focus on process of pathways to lead to jobs, no evidence emerged that policy-makers had networks in which to collaborate to erect a framework engaging the multiple discourses within which to analyse concerns. I interpreted this as



an absence of agreed symbols and language with which participants might interact with policy. There was no definition of equity and therefore no articulation of what should be measured as equity outcome (Max, pmkr2); no recognition of the “desirable public value of VET” (Tony, pmkr2; Riley, pmkr2; Inrns: Terry; Steph; Andy; Gerry; Bay) or human rights obligations; “bedevilling” (Max, pmkr2) focus on credentialism that failed to understand learners’ true progress; demotivating environment for teachers and trainers who were conscientious and believed in the learners’ capacities to achieve in ways that accumulation of qualifications did not recognise. There was no reference to academic research on key policy issues such as what is equity. My observation was that participants would welcome such information and the opportunity to think it through.

Situating my analysis within symbolic interactionism and the silent blueprint, came to theorise that equity as human rights, as fairness and social inclusion (2.5) is a symbol within the empirical evidence where its meaning will influence action and interactions among participants. The corollary is that the absence of meaning of equity as human rights will also have influence but in a different way. Pat’s (p. 130) direct quote that he and others didn’t understand the meaning of equity corroborated much evidence that equity is not clearly defined or understood, especially as a matter of human rights. The several core categories were emerging from comments like Pat’s and absence and silence were central.

In summary, “absence of policy insight” as a category has two key elements. First, as Ray and others signalled, there is absence of insight about the role of VET with regard to learners experiencing disadvantage. The contemporary role of VET where the objective of skills policy is productivity, or where the industry-demand model of skill policy prevails (2.8) is not defining or meeting objectives for equity. Objectives of equity should be more than skilling of jobs and should address broader matters of social inclusion. This concept impinges on all categories of the substantive grounded theory. Second, participants’ stated inability to define equity, together with the silence in the empirical material, allows an interpretation that in the implementation of skills policy there is absence of human rights, policy accountability and learners’ rights at law.

### **5.3.2 Social Categorisation, Group Capital and Mainstream Networks**

Policy-makers, teachers and trainers referred to social categorisation, usually in the context of the “collision” and “fear” around how to define equity, and found it inappropriate for developing skills among learners experiencing disadvantage. My observation was that learners were separated into classes based on their social categorisation. That is, observed from the whole perspective of public,

private and community providers, there were classes for people with disability, for women, for former refugees. The configuration was complex and appeared to prevail mostly in instances where there was contested funding. Some RTOs indicated that change was occurring in that there is a “shifting to barriers not equity [i.e. not socially categorised] groups” (Billy, pmkr1). While change is occurring in RTOs, comparative evidence revealed this is lesser in government policy and within funding criteria. Reflections on “social categorisation” were shot home when, I examined my own response to learners experiencing disadvantage and found a latent low expectation of what they may achieve. In a memo, I asked: Would my expectations be different if the learners were in a mainstream class? I observed, too, that learners categorised themselves in self-deprecating ways and I theorised that of itself social categorisation is a barrier to learning. I reflect on social categorisation below and then link it to properties of group capital and mainstream networks.

All RTO providers, teachers and trainers reported that they subverted notions of social categorisation to try to optimise outcomes for learners. Alex (pmkr2) and Billy (pmkr1) said that there is a “failing to find options to sub-populations [i.e. social categorisation]”. There was concern about how to determine equity groups other than by social categorisation and there were no clear ideas on what this might be. Tony (pmkr 2) said the idea that you are part of a group means you are disadvantaged is very “clunky”. I saw common language that the concepts of policy are those of the 1980s and are very “outdated” (Tony, pmkr2). The topic of social categorisation was one that often invited strong resistance from policy-makers and policy-implementers alike. Len (pmkr2) forcefully disagreed with social categorisation in policy. His view was that Tasmania is a community and all within it are members of the community – “You may happen to have a disability or to have broken the law or whatever but you are still a community member” (Len, pmkr2). Participants who were at the front line of implementing policy and/or teaching and training all said that social categorisation may be the policy criterion to attract funding but it was irrelevant to what occurred in the classroom. Consistent with this is Terry’s (tchr) example of people with a disability that had application to all social categories. Terry (tchr) said that “... the *disability* word is a pain ... [learners] can be capable but they are stuck in the disability box”.

Billy (pmkr1) raised a significant question: “... is there discomfort about equity, and ethics, or do concerns go simply to program design?” Billy said that public, private and community providers often discussed the perceived inefficacy of using social categorisation for developing skills. Glenn (pmkr1) said that at a recent roundtable comprising job service agencies and RTOs, all agreed that social categorising was counter-productive. Glenn (pmkr1) said that among colleagues there was great contradiction around equity in terms of rights and equity in program design. Ethically, he said,

providers eschewed social categorisation but did not know how to design programs without some form of compartmentalising of people. There was absence of insight about how to proceed. Glenn (pmkr1) said: "... the providers did not put up options" for alternative funding criteria.

The prevalence of social categorisation undermined the singular importance of cultivating what Ray (pmkr2) referred to as "group capital" as a way of advancing learners' development. The concept often intercepted with "mainstreaming" and is used here as providers, teachers and trainers frequently used it; it does not have a formal definition. "Group capital" emerged as a term to address providing fresh opportunities for learners built on interaction with others (learners or teachers and trainers) in teams. To build group capital, providers referred to the need to develop networks among practitioners as well as among learners experiencing disadvantage. Glenn (pmkr1) said that there was "enormous goodwill among all of the providers" to do this.

Ian (trnr) forcefully argued that absence of opportunity for group capital meant that even when learners experiencing disadvantage were qualified with a Certificate III, the qualification was sub-standard compared to the wider group of learners. Public, private and community providers invested time, and wished for time to invest, into selecting and placing learners in a way that would build cohesive groups (Alex, pmkr2; Tony, pmkr2; Stevie, pmkr2; Sam, trnr) and, in their view, enhance the learning process. Participants identified this as important in many ways. Taylor (trnr) and Ray (trnr) were amongst many who said that learners are best grouped with others with whom they are going to have complementary relationships that will stimulate their interest and advance their skills. Next, teachers and trainers need to have the flexibility to group and re-group learners as needs and circumstances change. Finally, Sam (trnr1) summed up that the absence of interaction – judicious and supported – with mainstream learners which is a feature of the existing system is an active inhibitor to advancing learners' skills.

Sam (trnr) spoke from experience of the benefits of mainstream opportunity. He said that a pilot program that gave learners course experience – opportunity to take part with mainstream learners in a managed way – had caused teachers "to be blown away" by the improved learning outcomes (Sam, trnr). Sam said that a course experience may involve learners going to a different campus; or it may involve a mainstream teacher offering classes to the learners experiencing disadvantage. Sam did not advocate immersion programs but spelled out the positive outcomes of managed, supported learning. Toni (pmkr2) commented similarly with respect to learners from a different social categorisation to that with which Sam was involved. She said that recently the teaching day had been extended by two hours. The afternoon work was focused on activities different from those of the morning but made "fun" (Toni) learning of activities that students were reticent about undertaking

on their own. Toni said: “... From the outset we are looking to build the dynamics among the students; we want them to interact well as teams” because engagement with fellow students built their capacity for more learning in mainstream environments.

Sam (pmkr2) referred to the importance of networks with other providers, mainstream courses and teachers and trainers. Sam said she “worked off the side of the desk” to seek out opportunities for new experiences for learners through providers for other groups who fitted a different social category. She said successful programs addressed to learner need rather than social categorisation had often happened incidentally and because of informal contact. The organisations and the learners of both providers benefitted from the new interaction. This was a major outcome but not one that was recognised in policy terms or for purposes of development and future funding (Tony, pmkr1).

Row (trnr) said she aimed to broaden learners’ experiences and a new program had been developed to train learners in volunteering. She said that volunteering is highly beneficial of itself but also in terms of focusing on learner needs and providing new opportunities and experiences. She said: “I am working alongside them. I can see how they are functioning and identifying what skills they do have. It’s the opportunity to practically see and assess – see the *real experience*. We can keep it real for them” (Row). Providers, teachers and trainers, and learners frequently referred to the positive aspects of volunteering for building group culture. An important positive aspect was the resulting development of networks among providers, teachers and trainers, and learners and with volunteering organisations. All expressed support for volunteering and commented that there is, in their view, a regrettable trend away from creating interaction with volunteer organisations.

Several learners spoke of the value to them of being part of a volunteer organisation (e.g. Bobbie; Leslie; Cam; Andy). Learners expressed willingness to volunteer time to support people in situations like their own. Leslie used her art skills to volunteer because her autistic students learned new skills and she used strategies with them to develop their curiosity and, arguably, learner disposition.

### **5.3.3 The Real Equity Groups**

The theorising repeatedly identified that the needs of learners who are participating are not being met; further, that there are “real” (Taylor, trnr) equity groups that are not being identified in the first place; and also that there are layers of unprecedented complexity for learners experiencing disadvantage. Gerunds in codes in layers of evidence for this matter were marked by emotions such as: being concerned, railing against, and despairing for learners and often in observation “shaking the head (in frustration)”.

Taylor's (trnr) perspective was a key part of clustered codes revealing that the real equity groups are not visible and, in Taylor's words, "... this is a social justice matter". However, she added "what we do is not a social justice model. We do not meet the goal of productivity or the goal of inclusion" (Taylor, trnr). Similarly to participants in the front line of VET equity delivery, she said that matters were worsening as "... we are finding that increasingly there are issues of multiple disadvantage ... there are more women at risk; more people coming in with physical issues and co-morbidity ..." (Taylor, trnr). Toni (pmkr2) similarly expressed concern of a widening equity gap and said that she grapples with inflexible funding criteria and tries to access drifting adult learners excluded from programs because of inadequate definitions. Toni (pmkr2) referred especially to homeless people who "cannot be found in the system because they have left the system". Private RTOs realised the inadequacy of trying to locate people through the government-contracted job service agencies and now allocated resources to go out to "... where people congregate when they need support ..." (Toni pmkr2).

Terry (pmkr2), similarly to Stevie (RTO), acknowledged – expressing emotions of some despair – that her learning centre "... does not work the way the system is now ... The pressure is on the system to have more students and that's how [the present number of students] came to be here. But we are not getting the real equity groups" (Terry). Pat (pmkr1) expressed views on behalf of community RTOs that the process of selecting and engaging learners experiencing disadvantage was haphazard and did not reflect where the need is. Recruitment, in her view, was driven by a goal to meet a number target: "... it's all about bums on seats ... there isn't any planning about who really needs the equity courses ..." (Pat pmkr1).

Among those who drilled down as to how to better define equity groups, Glenn (pmkr1) argued similarly to others that the "real" equity groups are elusive and that there are many changes needed to address contemporary issues. With regard to literacy and numeracy, for example, people in the old economic structure could get by, Glenn (pmkr1) said. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, literacy and numeracy are at the "pointy end of change" (Glenn (pmkr1) and literacy and numeracy should be reconfigured as a more pressing issue requiring integration with skills development generally.

In defining equity groups, the theory returns to traditions and dilemmas of Tasmania. Glenn (pmkr1) said that "... if we look at equity in terms of income then one-third of Tasmanians are in an equity group and this is a traditional position". Furthermore, the restructuring of the economy and the contingent losses of traditional jobs is creating a "whole new set of equity groups. Manufacturing especially with jobs loss is adding to that group" (Glenn, pmkr1). Alex (pmkr2) suggested that in most states and countries, a key determinant in equity policy is low socio-economic status. Almost conspicuous by its absence in participants' interview comments was the issue of low income. Alex

queried: “May this be because low income is almost a norm among the Tasmanian population?” (Alex, pmkr2).

### **5.3.4 Creating Viable Reality by Being Perverse**

Len (pmkr 2) coined the term “creating viable reality” when referring to the framework within which policy could be effectively formulated and implemented in classrooms. The theorising around this integrated with evidence of the process and actions of what RTOs are doing to create their “viable reality” and this revealed a perverse environment. All RTO policy-makers argued that policy-makers in government are unable to see that productivity outcomes depend on learners wishing to learn; on what it is that “switches on” (Len, pmkr2; Glenn, pmkr1) to learning those people who are experiencing disadvantage. “We’re on parallel tracks...”, Glenn (pmkr1) said. The response to this by RTOs is to be perverse, to adapt institutional policy that recognises that learners have outcomes other than setting out on a straight productivity path.

There are three aspects that intervene in setting learners on a straight productivity path. First, it appeared that macro government policy accepts that there are jobs where workers can be placed while, at the meso level of inquiry, RTOs – public, private and community– strongly held the position that learners do not find jobs to apply for: “this happens now and is going to be the future” (Glenn, pmkr1; Riley, pmkr2; Max, pmkr2). Second, coding of interviews with government policy-makers revealed a language and a perception that learners experiencing disadvantage will be readily identifiable and located. RTO policy-makers argued against this but also shared a view that the need for equity programs in Tasmania is “everywhere” (Pat, pmkr1; Glenn, pmkr1; Riley, pmkr2) – not just place-based in low socio-economic areas but also in suburbs where there are employed and high-income earners. Third, the resistance to the industry-demand focus emerged. The RTO focus was on developing capability through foundation programs and by generalist education. Policy-makers railed (Riley, pmkr2; Stevie, pmkr2; Len, pmkr2; Tony, pmkr2; Max, pmkr1; Alex, pmkr2), frequently with strong emotion such as anger, against high-level targets measured by qualifications and certificates when other measurable, more meaningful outcomes – “such as increased self-esteem” (Alex, pmkr2) – are needed to provide a path to skilling learners who are experiencing disadvantage. The culmination of these matters means that there are no optimum outcomes at private or public levels. To “switch on”, learners needed to see that jobs will be available, that employers understood who were the learners experiencing disadvantage and that disadvantage is pervasive across the community.

I theorised that “creating a viable reality” represented an expression of numerous participants that much government policy is out of step with the practicalities of learning, teaching and building futures. It was notable in the theorising that this was accompanied by professional concern as well as personal emotion. The interplay of professional concern and emotion is demonstrated in several ways. First, all RTO and government policy-makers deeply pondered questions and wished to respond in depth. Second, the language expressed personal emotion – the gerund coding revealed they were “worrying”, or “expressing anger” or “being concerned”. In addition, several participants related their comments to their personal background, or to that of a member of their immediate circle (Alex, pmkr2; Len, pmkr2; Sam, trnr; Len, pmkr2; Max, pmkr1).

In written observations from the first learning centre visit, I began to record that learners may be floundering but so too are providers and teachers and trainers. I constantly observed frustration since teachers and trainers felt there are policy obstacles to achievable outcomes for learners experiencing disadvantage. I next discuss traditions and dilemmas as these relate to learning disposition.

### 5.3.5 Traditions and Dilemmas

Naomi’s (lnnr) statement that “we are the welfare people” and the follow-up “I was a welfare child” is a stark expression of a learner’s tradition and dilemma. Many learners expressed similarly their traditions in terms of living on welfare and, as a result, of “not being good enough” (Gerry; Bay). Gerry provided a gender perspective on traditions and dilemmas when she said:

Attending school was not a priority ... it was just too easy not to go and to find a job in retail because that’s what girls were expected to do. Going to school was for children from private schools (Gerry, lnnr).

Max (pmkr 2) opined that Tasmania had a tradition and dilemma of perceiving itself as “second rate” in many fields of endeavour and this context must be accounted for in policy formulation. Billy (pmkr1) spoke of being a policy-maker coming “from outside” and how this had caused him to look for the ultra-violet of Tasmanian culture. He had, he said, the realisation that Tasmania is “... haunted by history “and of itself tradition is creating a contemporary dilemma (Billy).

Traditionally, localised industries could keep the population afloat or government would help to “bail people out” (Billy). Now, however, following the same pathway as previous generations is not a viable option as Australian Government funding changes and longstanding agreements around traditional industries, e.g. forestry and mining, disappear. Max (pmkr 2) reflected on the ghosts of history and said that as a result:

Now there is confusion about rites of passage. Where we have had longstanding communities because “my mother was, my father was etc.” we are now challenged. We have large groups who thought they had one direction; now they have another (Max, pmkr2).

Max’s (pmkr2) view, shared by many, was that “the changing world position and globalisation” is undercutting traditions that provided for people’s economic and social well-being. Max (pmkr1) and Glenn (pmkr1), and others, posited that traditional rites of passage now represent a “... dilemma in Tasmania as people previously enjoyed a village culture where people could say the community where they were born and grew up will now provide for them” (Max). Like many, Max deplores the word “residualisation” but it haunts how policy in skills development is, and may have to be, approached. Tasmanians with high skills will leave the state and government policy will have to rely on those who remain to grow productivity. Traditions and dilemmas come together with the other issues of this section in “highways to change”.

### **5.3.6 Highways to Change**

Billy (pmkr1) expressed the view that “highways, not pathways, to change” are needed with regard to equity in skills policy. Glenn (pmkr1) summed up that equity is “going awry by not articulating clearly”; RTO policy-makers (Toni; Len; Riley; Alex; Pat) and government policy-makers (Glenn; Tony); and teachers and trainers (Sam; Taylor; Jess; Katrina) all spoke of “dichotomies” and polarised goals of supply of and demand for skills and productivity for industry and participation in education (Billy, pmkr1). Almost all spoke of the challenge of policy-makers to “soften blunt [political] policy instruments” (Pat, pmkr1; Max, pmkr1; Billy, pmkr1). Just one policy-maker (Pat) ruminated in the context of a goal of governance as it may relate to discriminatory practice and the need for exploration as to whether, or not, discrimination may be an issue in the workplace but also with regard to how training programs are delivered for people experiencing disadvantage.

Despite considerable consensus that equity policy needs reform, policy-makers seemed to feel constrained by lack of influence as to how to effect change. Glenn (pmkr1) reflected that equity could only be effective if it were embedded but that “history says that the only way ... is a mandated trigger. Social change often starts with legislation”. Three policy-makers (Riley, pmkr2; Glenn, pmkr1; Billy, pmkr1) opined that reforms to equity in skills policy needed collaboration across all the skills sector, involving private and public providers, as well as key actors in the sector. Their views were reflected in the comments of RTO policy-maker Riley:



I am delighted to have this conversation [about equity in skills development]; it is frustrating that it is so hard to have. Part of the ongoing debate ... is that many of us [policy-makers] want to be able to influence policy in this area (Riley, pmkr2).

Billy expressed a view not raised by others. He said that “When considering policy, while there are programs and policies especially targeted at equity programs, really it is the whole policy” (Billy, pmkr1). Billy continued: “You get a better understanding of what is on the ground by looking at whole of skills [i.e. not just VET] policy rather than in isolation” and expressed the view that equity is “talked about in a funny way” (Billy, pmkr1). Pat (pmkr1) expressed the issues in summing-up terms when he said: “There is a great big gap between [the funders] and providers of programs and that goes to governance of equity”.

### **5.3.7 Absence of Insight at Multiple Levels**

The theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (3.7) in analysis brought forth symbols, interaction and meaning making that was surrounded by confusion, conflicting statements and a sense of powerlessness to make change by all participants. Equity and industry dominance of government policy emerged as a clash between governance formulators and policy implementers; how to provide services to learners and to train for some future, local, purpose was a conundrum within existing policy frameworks; significantly, there was little evidence to emerge about how to make meaning of equity in skills policy. The constant comparison of codes and the emergence of categories pointed to an absence of insight at levels of government policy formulation as well as policy implementation. In this respect, I realised my own preliminary absence of insight. I had not anticipated that the focus of this study would become a matter of the processes and actions of governance and public administration. This is not to say that RTO or institutional policy was irrelevant; it did not emerge as a core category.

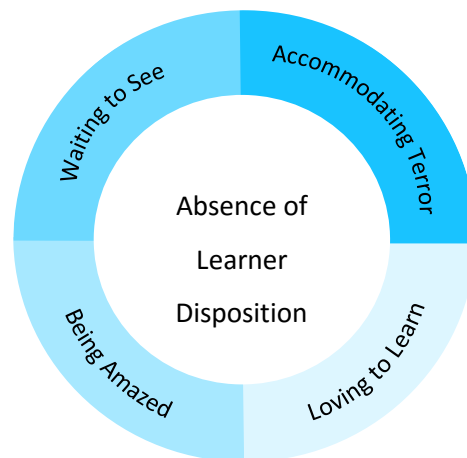
## **5.4 Core Category: Absence of Learner Disposition**

Max (pmkr1) is a policy-maker but he said that he is “feeling unhappy with the language of policy” because it is not “accommodating student experience”. Tony (pmkr2) expounded on this kind of view, arguing that we are “not understanding the processes of people’s lives”. He said we need to do more with regard to “changing aims in accordance with learners” lived experience (Tony, pmkr2). Alex (pmkr2) argued that government policy-makers were using the “wrong symbols and visuals” and were not connecting at all with the present and potential learners (Alex, pmkr2). Not only learners and teachers and trainers, but also policy-makers drove the category of “absence of learner disposition”.

The core category of “absence of learner disposition” emerged from my constructivist approach to theorising in which learners were viewed as agentic and engaged with me on the research project. Unlike “absence of policy insight”, the core category emerged from focused codes which themselves elevated to categories within a framework of “learner disposition”. I had explored learner disposition through the questions of “Do you like to learn?” to learners and “Do you think learners experiencing disadvantage like to learn” to RTO and government policy-makers and teachers and trainers, respectively. In the research design, I put aside frameworks of social categorisation or barriers that were traditional ways of visualising the learner as I sought a profile of learner identity. The learner disposition is itself unexplored as a policy matter in Australia (Farrington et al., 2012) and at all levels of theorising this was identified as a problem.

The core category emerged from empirical evidence through three ways: the theorising showed that learner disposition should be a visible concept in policy but it is not; there was overwhelming evidence that learners’ input to skills development policy is not routinely sought; and, within the dialogue there no reference to learners’ rights and no indication from learners and teachers that they, and the RTOs, were accountable for learners’ rights. Learners and teachers and trainers had high levels of communication about learners’ learning needs but these and broader issues were not addressed in skills policy. Issues might be, for example, support services required for a person with a disability, or counselling for a learner with depression, or a rehabilitation focus for a learner who is in prison.

“Absence of learner disposition” represents theorising about learners who participate in learning but it should be borne in mind that it reflects the circumstances of marginalised people, and the “real equity groups” discussed above who are not in the VET system at all. These silent voices are marginalised from the norms or the “middle-classness” of skills policy that learners, teachers and trainers as well as policy-makers represented as a considerable barrier to participation in learning. The categories of the core category are: accommodating terror; loving to learn; being amazed; waiting to see. The extract from the substantive grounded theory is set out below. I discuss the categories as aspects of learner disposition; after discussion, I present “learner disposition as interaction of categories”.



**Figure 5.3: Absence of Learner Disposition**

### 5.4.1 Accommodating Terror

Outside this room their behaviour would be different. They would probably not want to talk to you. They are probably not too safe in their head. A lot of them are afraid of everything and they trust no-one; there are lots of anxiety issues – for them it’s a dog eat dog world (Gray, trnr).

The word “accommodating” in this category emerged after a very great deal of analysis. “Accommodating” reflected macro, meso and micro evidence that learners experiencing disadvantage come to deal with, or accommodate, the feelings they have experienced before they entered classrooms. Their feelings have new positive input from realisations of what learning is and how it can be “amazing”. However, “accommodate” was chosen to also reflect that the terror learners experience does not go away. “Accommodating terror” emerged from statements like Gray’s above. The category was ultimately placed first in a configuration that emerged as temporal and processual but was the last category to be developed because it emerged from layers of theorising. It is significant to note that the theorising revealed that the learner disposition is a matter of temporal process which is a conGT tenet; the learners themselves revealed this throughout the interviews. This aspect is significant for policy because it recognises what the learners themselves said: that their experiences were not static; that they changed over time; that they interacted with the changing environment around them. This is an example of how “learner disposition” is a matter

for consideration by policy-makers. Some aspects of “terror” are represented in the sub-category of “accommodating terror” as discussed below. Those aspects cover responses to concepts of officialdom and life’s circumstances generally.

Toni (pmk 2) said that learners – male and female – are “terrified” when they are considering taking part in an equity program and therefore the trappings, or symbols, of middle-class officialdom, e.g. official language, are not used because it can invoke fear. Toni (pmkr2), Alex (pmkr2) and Stevie (pmkr2) said that carers and/or parents are invited to join interviews. Any testing is undertaken in a very informal manner. Toni said that engagement with any kind of “officialdom” “... is extremely daunting for learners. The thought of it is so daunting we put a lot of effort into a process that is good for them ... these things are necessary to help them with their fear of learning” (Toni, pmkr2). Terry (trnr) said that there are students who are “incredibly anxious” and terror can be so ingrained that it is “...a form of culture shock when learners enter into this world which is new and middle class”. She urged me to observe a group of learners with whom we were on an excursion, saying “Their shoulders are down; they are looking down. Everything is so scary” (Terry, trnr). Terry also said that teachers and trainers introduced basic tasks to help learners to cope with their “... feelings of being inferior, not like us”, to see that they can work independently, that they can talk to somebody, and that they do not have to be scared of other people. Terry (trnr) expressed a view that several other participants engaged with when she said that the norms of middle-class behaviour, and appearance, set the goals to the disadvantage of learners. Terry lamented that “The option is to aim to fit ... and if you don’t comply you go to specialist school or prison” (Terry, trnr).

The terror that learners experience may take many forms, and learners did show a propensity to philosophise this and life’s circumstances. Bobbie (lnnr) said he was stressed about the future and the human race and his fear involved issues of climate change, other people’s homophobia, and the way Muslim women are treated. He was anxious that “half the human race is mad” (Bobbie, lnnr). He was tentative about the future and said he looked forward to work but “... that is a long way away. I have little self-confidence. I don’t like to be alone. Mum won’t move with me” (Bobbie, lnnr). Chris (lnnr) expressed past feelings of fear but said that eventually having a diagnosis of autism made a positive difference. He said: “after they knew I had autism (when I was 14) it was easier. It was much easier when they know my disability. I know they can help me then” (Chris, lnnr). Row, Frances, Cam, Naomi (lnnrs) and other learners expressed fear of men, often because men were unfamiliar because they were not present in their family and developmental years, or because they had experienced or witnessed domestic violence. Gerry (lnnr) said:

I found it very unusual to go to a house where there was a father. Lots of my friends had parents where mum and dad were fighting, dad being dominant ... men did not go to school to see sports; it was always the mums. It was a vicious cycle (Gerry, lnrr).

The terror of the prospect of learning can be so disabling that it will not be fully evident among existing equity groups because the “real” (Terry, trnr; Tony, pmkr2; Taylor, tchr) equity groups are too afraid to enter RTO premises that are perceived as middle class. Glenn (pmkr1) expressed learner fear in terms of “lack of confidence” but saw this as a deep, constraining issue for learners. Glenn (pmkr1) said that, paradoxically, learners ascribed as experiencing disadvantage were often themselves “... quite middle class” but they were as anxious as other learners. The true equity groups, middle class or not, are too nervous; there are too many barriers to even attend classes” (Glenn pmkr1). Dale (trnr) said that a positive group culture is one way to help “... learners begin to feel safe because within the group they are learning that not everyone is bad”.

In memos, I observed that policy-makers tended to use more remote terms such as the “social inability” or the need for “building confidence” while teachers and trainers, and some providers who had classroom experience, were vocal about the degree of outright fear that learners experienced. My memo’ed observations were that in all learning spaces there was a heartening, positive, physical and emotional ambience achieved because teachers and trainers understood their learners lived experience. Teachers and trainers differed from policy-makers in interpreting the learner experience with regard to feelings of fear and terror. Teachers and trainers were much more in tune with the research coding that drew forth “disappearing aspirations” among learners and were more likely to empathise with the “fearing” the “sorrowing”, the “stressing” or the “scariness” that emerged with coding.

### **5.4.2 Loving to Learn**

I decided myself to do [this class]. I wanted to learn reading and writing. I want to improve what I am writing; I want to learn more out of it. Mum rang up and found out ... I dream about all the books (Kelsey).

My dream job: I want to work in childcare. Biggest thing I want to do is get my diploma. Then I will be happy (Bay).

“Loving to learn” was the first sub-category to emerge in the theory and was part of the first question: Do you like to learn (to learners), or, Do you think learners experiencing disadvantage like to learn? (to other participants). I represent differently the theory generated for this section because

I separated analysis among learners and stakeholders. I did this to represent and legitimate a code that I anticipated may be contentious. I wanted to represent theory that had been subject to rigorous cross comparison.

This sub-category was the most uncomplicated of all codes to analyse. There was almost no prevarication from learners or other participants that there is a love of learning, a positive learner disposition. Nonetheless, it was a code that I re-visited often, and tested in theoretical sampling, because it was surprising in the extent to which it rebutted what I had expected to hear. This coding joined with coding of “low expectations” (Len, pmkr1; Tony, pmkr2; Glenn, pmkr1) in policy that policy-makers and providers rejected.

Second, I wrote conceptual memos and interrogated coding to decide whether to interview further to discover what it is that learners like to learn. The answer came from Toni (pmkr2) when she said that one of the reasons she understood that learners may not have embraced learning in the past was because they “... don’t know what learning is ...”. She said that that was how basic their instruction had to be: to “... open up for (learners) what learning is and what there is to learn” (Toni, pmkr2). The significance of this was that it underlined that it is people in the system who, in supportive circumstances, can come to state that they “love to learn”. Would they have made the same answer before signing up to classes? Would people who are not in the system believe they do not like learning because they have not had been exposed to opportunities? Therefore, if there is a qualification to “loving to learn”, it is that it must be regarded with reference to context and conditions when policy considerations are being made.

The transcripts of learners’ interviews are rarely fully coherent and linear in thought. Several learners said that they needed time to answer the question because they had “memory problems”, or “trouble remembering”, or “attention shortage”. I present evidence generated from interviews in response to the question “Do you like to learn?” to learners and “Do you think learners experiencing disadvantage like to learn” to other participants.

#### **5.4.2.1 Learners**

“Loving to learn” was spiked with some differences in what was being enjoyed and why learning was taking place. Kelsey (lnnr) said that her learning experience is new. She said: “I want to improve what [I] am writing; I want to learn more out of it” (Kelsey, lnnr). Kelsey was inspired to learn about a new range of topics and said: “I dream about all the books” (Kelsey, lnnr). Kelsey’s enthusiasm was similar to Bobbie’s. It was representative of about half of the learners and revealed a passion about learning and an eclectic selection of interests – e.g. in Bobbie’s case, philosophy; ornithology; technology.

Bobbie said that he liked to learn because “Learning is an essence of life ... if birds didn’t learn to fly, where would we be? If we didn’t learn, we wouldn’t have made stone tools or made fire” (Bobbie, Innr).

However, Bobbie also said that learning was not easy for him and coming to understand how to learn was crucial to his future. He had come to like learning more as he was older because he was learning to “stay on task” (Bobbie, Innr). Kim (Innr) also saw learning as central to living. He said:

It is the essential things in our life because without learning you are just like ... people direct you. When you have education and you could control your life and you have better life and understanding about everything in the world ... when you actually are well educated you actually have got an open mind (Kim, Innr).

Gerry (Innr), like Bobbie and others, said that she loved to learn and in the past year had found “new things to know about”. She said: “In [x transition program] yesterday we did stuff on ... I can’t remember ... When people come from different countries they have to do citizenship. It is intriguing to know what others have to do. I love coming here” (Gerry, Innr). There were learners who said or revealed that they were not highly motivated and not seeking work but that they did benefit socially from classes. Learners combined their love of learning and curiosity about new topics with delight that they now were part of something, were meeting new people and doing things.

Cam represented a group of learners less confident about finding work than, say, Bobbie; however, Cam said that she very much “enjoyed” coming to classes and that although learning with a disability was not easy, she really wanted to so that she could find a job in film animation. She said learning is hard “Because I don’t understand most of the time. I like drawing and painting” (Cam, Innr). However, learning had become essential to her well-being – because she had improved her communication skills. She said: “My words is [*sic*] my art” (Cam, Innr).

Andy was one of many students who valued learning for the enrichment it brought through volunteering. Andy was new to the class and said that she didn’t want to come but “Mum wanted me to come”. She said her experiences in class were positive and although she liked to learn she hadn’t set out to look for a job. Her obvious satisfaction was that she liked “... to learn how to be a good student” (Andy, Innr). She was happy also that she was now doing voluntary work with animals. Avery said that she was glad that her volunteer learning program gave her work placement. She said that she “really wants to work with animals” and that she loves her new placement “cleaning for animals” (Avery, Innr). Avery philosophised that when she is happy it is better because then “my happiness helps other people” (Avery, Innr). Jamie also philosophised that even though she may not have paid

work, she can contribute through volunteering. Jamie said that she used her love of art to “lock myself away from bullying” (Jamie, lnrr) and that she loved to volunteer to help children to use art in a similar way.

A major element of the substantive grounded theory is the drive of learners to be in occupations that serve other people. Gerry, mother of three children, said that while she had had some work in the past, her education was limited and she wanted to be able to change what she was doing. A main barrier is the cost of childcare. For Gerry, learning and acquiring skills is about the opportunity to help other people. Gerry said in her class she is deeply grateful for the supportive environment and she benefitted from now looking forward to continuing her own development and being able to support others. She said:

I love learning things to help other people. There are people who are supportive; people to show you how to learn. They develop what you do know and then teach you more. I enjoy that ... younger ones gravitate towards me ... I just like helping.

As with many participants, Gerry said that there was a defining moment for her and she would see her future differently because she had learned that “... I want to help people and I can actually do that as a job” (Gerry, lnrr). Bay was similarly passionate about helping others. She said that she had experienced “crap early years” (Bay, lnrr) and had been a victim of violence. Bay said that she is working hard to achieve a childcare diploma and that her “dream is to have a childcare job” (Bay, lnrr). Jules, BJ and Kelly were of the same family in a class and shared similar ambition to help others. All were adults and all were committed to lifelong learning. BJ said: “It is good to learn to live in this world. Learning is part of work. We can learn at any time. It is good to learn to look after elderly people” (BJ, lnrr).

The category of “loving to learn” was discernible in interviews with most learners. Coding arising from learners’ interviews included loving to learn, or loving to learn to work with animals; loving to write, do art, do craft; loving to learn different things, like carpentering, cooking, making sandwiches; loving to learn community care; loving to learn English and absolutely loving to learn about “things like citizenship”. The theorising of “loving to learn” is that the enthusiasm projected was often conditioned by the cognitive capability of the learner, as identified by the learner. This meant that “loving to learn” may not include the expectation of paid work. All learners had undertaken at least one previous, and often several, activities involving learning. These included other certificates at levels I or perhaps II; skills development in volunteer programs; informal learning. The emerging theory signalled a sense of gladness to be in a learning program and to feel that learning was occurring and that there may be a pathway to achieving further skills, perhaps up to a diploma. The



evidence that emerged from policy-makers was not incompatible with “loving to learn” but did have different nuances. This evidence is discussed below.

#### **5.4.2.2 Policy-makers**

The theorising of policy-makers’ interviews clustered around numerous initial and focused codes. The key properties were: the switch; the venue; traditions and dilemmas. The latter was the most dominant in discussion. I discuss each below.

Senior policy-makers in RTOs and in government areas were insistent that the great majority of people who are defined as experiencing disadvantage like to learn and that the key was to “find the switch” (Riley, pmkr1). Riley considered it offensive to have a view that people do not like to learn. His experience is that everyone likes to learn, including “a drunken man in [venue]” (Riley, pmkr1). He said we should be asking learners:

What are your hopes and dreams? Yes, I hear you can’t get up in the morning but ... but in the hands of a good educator in a positive environment, we can do amazing things. Every one of us has a switch (Riley, pmkr1).

Glenn (pmkr1) expressed great concern for learners experiencing disadvantage and reflected in terms of the processual, temporal aspects of learners’ experience. Glenn said that it is “always perceived that learners experiencing disadvantage don’t want to learn” but he said that “the vast majority of people want to learn” (Glenn, pmkr1). There is a process and “... over time when there is no purpose and no long-term outcome, they don’t” (Glenn, pmkr1). The key was to provide purpose and people will want to learn.

Len (pmkr2) advocates strongly for reform in skills policy. He said: “We get stuck on learning. Several learners are quite low on literacy but ...” there are different ways of learning and “... we need to know how they want to learn” (Len, pmkr2). Len was adamant that: “There is a lot of dormant talent whether in [his venue] or not” (Len, pmkr2). The key to change is better understanding learner disposition and communication is an essential part of this. Toni (pmkr2) summed up for other policy-makers when she said: “It is necessary to find a way of communicating so that learners understood what learning is. Once communication has taken place, all kinds of obstacles potentially dissolve for learners” (Toni, pmkr2). As with others, Toni emphasised that policy should U-turn to begin with a position of “high expectations” as to the potential learning capacity of adults experiencing disadvantage. Len (pmkr1) is seeking reform in VET equity for all learners experiencing disadvantage and is especially concerned with linking learning and reduction of recidivism rates. His view was that “everyone will enjoy learning if you find how” (Len, pmkr1).

Glenn (pmkr1) raised the matter of the venue for learning. Similarly to RTO policy-makers and some government policy-makers, Glenn is of the view that learners “do not like to learn in formal class room settings – there appears to be a preference for learning places without an institutional ambience” (Glenn, pmkr1) or perhaps a reminder of previous unhappy school days. Glenn agreed that most people like to learn although various barriers can be constraining. He defined learning disposition in terms of motivation and linked this to the importance of providing the appropriate physical place, saying: “I think that as much as you can generalise it is fair to say that they don’t like to learn in classroom settings. That would be a fair generalisation” (Glenn, pmkr1).

Pat (pmkr1) expressed the issue of venue in terms of the experience of older people. He said: formal learning in formal places is “so foreign to them that anecdotally, people in their 50s think that means they are never going to get another job” (Pat, pmkr1). Pat compared the present with the 1980s experience when new technology resulted in the shedding of clerical jobs. For older people this represented the end of work – they would never get another job – and the idea of re-entering a classroom was not entertained. Pat said, “there are profound implications for older people who are losing their jobs” (Pat, pmkr1).

Traditions and dilemmas are a pervasive presence in all levels of theorising in the substantive grounded theory. In “absence of insight”, I drew attention to changing traditions and “rites of passage” (Glenn, pmkr1) and how a history of perceiving themselves as “second rate” haunted Tasmanian learners. I briefly address the topic here again because policy-makers constantly contextualised their perspective of “loving to learn”, and of “finding the switch” with reference to traditions and dilemmas. Alex and Toni, both private RTO policy-makers, said that traditionally education is not valued in Tasmania and, regrettably, “equity is the biggest part of our business” as a result. Billy (pmkr1) argued similarly that in Tasmania “really everywhere is equity. The whole state is an equity state” (because it is disadvantaged compared to other states). Billy (pmkr1) cast the traditional Tasmanian learner with reference to migrants and refugees and said that “Tasmanians are harder nuts to crack”. Billy argued that there is a “greater gap in motivation between refugees and Tasmanians in favour of refugees”. Pat (pmkr1) said: “If you grow up in a household where education is not valued – and many Tasmanians do – you are not going to value education; it takes a strong kid to go over the top of that”. Stevie (pmkr2) and Jesse (trnr) argued similarly that the learners “have no goals. They need a light at the end of the tunnel”. Stevie drew a picture of a Tasmanian culture where “Centrelink (as welfare funding agency) is the impetus”.

In Chapter 2, the context of the study, traditions and dilemmas derived from the concept of *habitus* and *habitus* as traditions and dilemmas was developed concurrently with the category of learner

disposition. All participants referred to the symbols of history and what these mean for the present in formulating skills policy and equity objectives. I next discuss “loving to learn” on evidence provided by teachers and trainers, in public and private RTOs respectively.

#### **5.4.2.3 Teachers and Trainers**

Gray (trnr) said that nearly all the students were “really capable” and “more than half of this class could do whatever they want”. Teachers/trainers (Gray; Taylor; Dale) reported some equity learners as having especially strong inclination to learn arising, they opined, from their background of deprivation. For example, former refugees and pregnant young parents (usually women learners) all reported a very strong desire to learn, engage and advance. Gray said that many people lived in negative learning environments but still will like to learn. Many adults “... didn’t take it seriously because no-one else did” (Gray, tchr). Taylor was passionate about developing programs to suit individuals’ positive learning disposition and their needs. He said:

The issue is that there may not be appropriate ways for them to learn in the way they wish. If I lived in [suburb x, considered in policy to be a low socio-economic area] and I had been in a family unemployed for generations and I don’t have the skills to step into a normal life and behave in that way, I don’t know how to (Taylor, trnr).

Taylor referred to migrants and former refugees and said that they exemplified how motivated students experiencing disadvantage can be. He said: “[Migrants and former refugees] would be amongst the most motivated you will ever meet. They want to integrate, have a job, and succeed. Across all age groups” (Taylor, trnr). “Loving to learn” emerged as a first step in a process; “being amazed” emerged as another step in the process and I discuss this category below.

#### **5.4.3 Being Amazed**

After a little while I came here. I love it. You get to learn like I never learned before. It is so amazing; you learn all these different things (Naomi, lnr).

Theorising of being amazed – theorising from a frequent *in vivo* code – was inducted from evidence from learners, providers and teachers and trainers. Being amazed built on “loving to learn” in a context of discovering what learning is. Being amazed referred to the “how much there is to learn” (Naomi, lnr), that it was “not just for younger people” (Naomi) and that prior learning when assessed was significant. Tony (pmkr2) said that amazement and enthusiasm grew among learners as they settled into programs and, especially, as they became part of a strong, supportive group with other learners. Toni’s extension of class hours, referred to earlier in this chapter, was a “potentially

risky” strategy to cultivate the learners’ amazement but it has proved successful. Toni (pmkr2) said: “We have found that this extra time really helps with learning. The extra time gives repetition time in fun, practical, interactive ways” (Toni, pmkr2). Alex (pmkr2) said learners’ amazement is a key factor in determining what to measure as an outcome in equity programs. He used the example of the woman in her 40s who expressed immense pride when she completed her first certificate. He said her achievement would not be measureable in terms of present policy but that: “... the real achievement for this adult female student was the capacity to change a perception of herself ... she can go on to do other things” (Alex, pmkr2).

Ray (trnr) reported that some “adapting” of criteria took place to acquire funding and then to implement strategies for programs. Ray said that an important outcome of certificate II is that learners “... do a lot of self-esteem, working with others. The curriculum allows them to have lots of scope” (Ray, trnr). Max (pmkr1) spoke with conviction of the value of engaging people by helping them to be amazed at what they could do – of building self-esteem – and of adapting to individual motivation. Max said that we must constantly remember that “... students grow”. Billy (pmkr1) opined that it is difficult to bring together policy that deals with both the crucial importance of jobs as well as learner disposition. He said:

This is why we find a struggle [to achieve good outcomes in VET equity]. We need to grab these two views [of policy-makers and providers]. Having empathy with students is important; job outcomes are important too. Until we have programs that acknowledge both those truths, that is the problem (Billy, pmkr1).

Interviewing to discover the love of learning was an uplifting and optimistic experience. Through, however, I had the sense that optimism may be circumscribed. This emerged through the category of “waiting to see” which I next discuss.

#### **5.4.4 Waiting to See**

I would like to work somewhere in the future. Wait and see. See how I go with work placements. I would like work in reception say in hospitality. I really like it here. I like the atmosphere (Andy, lnrr).

“Waiting to see” inducted from evidence of all participants in common with absence of insight and silent voices. It is a category that gives pause to the processual analysis that had delivered “loving to learn” and “being amazed”. This category is a stark indication of the inability of the system to continue to support personal growth and skills development in learners experiencing disadvantage.

Learner Andy provided the *in vivo* code when he said: “I would like to work somewhere in the future. Wait and see. See how I go with work placement” (Andy, lnrr). The code may just as easily have emerged from most of the participants’ interviews. Almost all were waiting to see with regard to possible work and the future. Frankie (lnrr), for example, said he was “hanging” while he waited to own a car and this made him “jealous” of people with plans.

At a level of implementation of programs, Tony (pmkr2) said that “employers generously provide work placements for students so students can demonstrate the skills they have learnt in class.” However, the learners were left waiting to see because it is hard to get employers involved to take the next steps to employ students. “Employers find it difficult to make the time to attend the training and therefore do not get involved” (Tony, pmkr2). Taylor (trnr) spoke about the stalling of progress of learners. She said one recent learner progressed through to a diploma and has work but “... he is [not the norm]; he is a ‘poster boy’”. Furthermore, his work is casual so he remains with a sense of insecurity and waiting to see.

The -category of “waiting to see” emerges also from “absence of insight” and a broad perspective of adverse effects of globalisation, crumbling of traditions and emergence of new dilemmas and the perverseness of the industry-demand focus which is part of contemporary policy in Australia. Alex (pmkr2) expressed frustration that learners are left waiting to see because: “What is not known is the expected outcome when it comes to providing equity courses for learners. We don’t know if people can get jobs” (Alex, pmkr2). Government, private and community RTOs, and learners and teachers, railed when they said that the government policy with its focus on industry demand is compounding the problem of lack of work for people experiencing disadvantage. This is seen in the “phenomenon of absence of insight” when Riley summed up for others that “there are no jobs and our students are going to be left in limbo” (Riley, pmkr2).

The -category of “waiting to see” is an abrupt change in direction in the coding to develop learner disposition. In memo’ing context and conditions, I saw this category as an indicator of why I had puzzled over codes of excitement about learning but, at the same time, I sensed lack of enthusiasm and optimism for the long term in learners experiencing disadvantage. The learners experiencing disadvantage had all responded to my interview questions with reference to the present or past, rarely to the future. I next coalesce discussion of the categories of “absence of learner disposition” to conceptualise learner disposition.

### 5.4.5 Absence of Learner Disposition: Interaction of Categories Forming Learner Disposition

Learners were waiting to see and in the meantime saying and doing in a way that suggested disappearing aspirations whether in work, volunteering or other areas of life. In observations, a significant silence in the analysis was the lack of learner planning for a future that might include work, social inclusion and opportunities to have family and to build satisfying lives. Frankie (Irnir) said: “I used to have aspirations but now I don’t”. As with several of the learners, he was undertaking his third Certificate II because there was little else for him to do.

The theory takes learners from internal feelings of terror in the past, to love of and amazement in learning for the present and halts in its progress with waiting to see whether they will have an economically and socially inclusive future. The process is depicted in Figure 5.4 below.



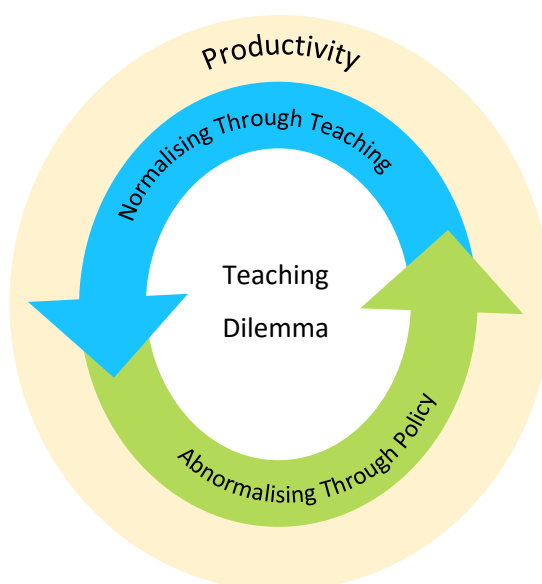
Figure 5.4: Learner Disposition

Figure 5.4 demonstrates an interaction of the categories of accommodating terror, loving to learn, being amazed, and waiting to see. The categories are subjective responses in a process moving between the internal realities of learners. The code of “waiting to see” is an emergence from subjective response to an external position of looking outwards for something to come along to ensure further progress. Similarly, the processes can be temporal, representing past, present and future. As the learner is poised, waiting to see, the past will inform the present and instigate the progress, or regression, that may occur.

“Absence of learner disposition” highlighted opportunities for improved governance and public administration of equity in skills policy. Together with “absence of insight” where analysis found a policy vacuum, “absence of learner disposition” shows that policy may be developed around inviting learners to contribute; around greater expectations of learners experiencing disadvantage and their capacity to grow; and with accommodation of symbols of traditions and dilemmas to inculcate the public value of skills development and education generally. I next turn to the third category of the substantive grounded theory: “teaching dilemma”

## 5.5 Core Category: Teaching Dilemma

“Teaching dilemma” comprises categories of “normalising through teaching” and “abnormalising through policy”. The substantive grounded theory is depicted in Figure 5.5 below.



**Figure 5.5: Teaching Dilemma**

The teaching dilemma lay in a range of social and organisational matters, not least of which is the absence of policy insight and the absence of learner disposition. But along the pathway this process of a dilemma in teaching and training was especially defined in terms of the extensive constant comparison among all participants and on the coding that demonstrated “normalising by teaching” on the one hand and “abnormalising through policy” on the other. In this way, the substantive grounded theory of problematic equity drew out the conflict and confusion among all participants about almost all aspects of equity in skills development. I discuss: normalising through teaching; abnormalising through policy; and “teaching dilemma”.

### 5.5.1 Normalising Through Teaching

The option is to aim to fit; or we give them the finger up. Then it is over for them. So where is the classroom that fits that person? (Taylor, trnr).

The “saying” codes of teachers and trainers embrace “loving to teach/train” and “committing to helping students” (all teachers and trainers). On the other hand, there are teachers and trainers who are frustrated at “putting everyone in the same box” (Row); fearing for students that are “diverted from the mainstream” (Sam); “worrying about increasing [undiagnosed] compounded disability” (Taylor); lamenting the “middle-classness” (Taylor) of education; noting that they are “losing older students” (Taylor). The category of normalising through teaching emerged in part as recognition that participants were attempting to make normal a set of circumstances which were complex and volatile. One had the sense of many square pegs in round holes. The properties of the coding presented as: productivity objectives and the classroom; mainstream; too middle class. Each is discussed below.

Policy-makers and teachers and trainers (Len; Billy; Max; Sam; Gray) opined that it is not possible to teach for productivity objectives in the classroom of learners experiencing disadvantage. Ray (trnr) referred to the policy framework of productivity and the clash with the teaching demands where most learners “have extreme needs” and “even low potential in some cases”. However, she said: “these students would/could be productive in the workforce [if we got the policy right]” (Ray, trnr). Ray went on to say that people with intellectual disability can have very good success rates getting into supported or open employment but “they must be provided with the opportunity” (Ray, trnr). Ray, like other participants, emphasised that existing policy is frustrating because she knows learners want to work and yearn to be socially included. Alex and Tony (both pmkr2s) said that in light of the perverseness of their teaching environment, what teachers are doing in the classroom is “adapting” (Alex, pmkr2; Tony, pmkr2) and “strategising” and trying to provide opportunities with the objective of working with the learner disposition of individual learners, not with reference to job pathways or their ascribed social categorisation (Ray, pmkr2; Billy, pmkr2). Ray strongly resisted social categorisation but, she said, “Sometimes we have to [socially categorise] for a grant” (Ray, pmkr2). Ray said that in any event, in Tasmania it is impractical to socially categorise “... because the numbers are too small to make it viable” (Ray, pmkr2).

Teachers and trainers (Alex; Tony; Sam; Mark; Riley). are seeking mainstream opportunities within the process of helping learners to “normalise” but policy-makers said that these are not available (Dale, Stevie, pmkr2). This was reflected in the views across the board and was especially true for



teachers and trainers of former refugees. Teachers and trainers were working outside policy settings, and without funding, to engage learners with mainstream activities which had proved very successful. Billy's (pmkr2) comments were consistent with those of several teachers and trainers. Billy spoke of government policy and said networking and mainstreaming had begun to take place and:

We now have a really good understanding of ... the gap between our students and the mainstream. But it is still not sufficient communication with mainstream courses (not because we haven't tried). The key is to get funding. But it should be a regular thing (Billy, pmkr2).

The category of normalisation emerged from properties of "social stratification" and especially "the middle class". However, there were conflicting messages. Taylor (tchr) referred to the "class consciousness of the education system" itself. Teachers and trainers interpreted the industry-demand focus of skills development as driving education as "too middle class". On the other hand, Billy (pmkr1) suggested that the system is not engaging the "true" equity groups. Billy (pmkr1) said "The reality is that of the ones who go straight into [local RTO], many are not equity groups. They are quite middle class" (Billy, pmkr1). The *in vivo* code of normalising was indicated through such codes as "learning to fit" or "observing social non-compliance" as a barrier or "valuing learners' sense of self". This was at the first rather obvious level. With further generation of evidence, normalising emerged as a pervasive category. A conundrum for participants was that normalising through teaching with the result that a learner enjoys improved social and economic inclusion is one thing. It is another matter to be normalising in a way that may stifle individuality and creativity, or that may lead to exclusion of especially disadvantaged learners, e.g. people who are homeless, or people with drug and alcohol problems. A telling message was that providers and educators expended so much energy in adapting prevailing policies that there was little remaining resource to engage with industry to develop supported employment partnerships.

### 5.5.2 Abnormalising Through Policy

People with disability feel they are 'stuck'. But they 'stick out' really (Melanie, lnrr).

The substantive grounded theory integrates the category of "abnormalising through policy". The abnormalising is represented also in "absence of learner disposition". The category of abnormalising through policy is reflected especially in the interviews with learners in equity courses. These are people whom the abstract theory demonstrates love to learn but their learner disposition is absent from policy. While the system strives to make them feel normal in fact they are abnormalised. The elements of "teaching dilemma" emerged from focused codes of: putting in boxes; and blunt policy.

### **5.5.2.1 Putting in Boxes**

“Putting in boxes” was a pervasive property and code as learners experiencing disadvantage tried to mould themselves for ultimate productivity in the workplace. One trainer (Lesley) reported that employers say, “You are fooling yourself” implying that the learners in equity programs would never be productive in the workplace. One teacher (Taylor) said that of course not all learners are the same and this is demonstrated by the numerous individual learner programs she took into the classroom each day. Terry (trnr) said that “This is the biggest problem we have. Not only do I have numerous individual lesson plans, but I have numerous plans for one individual because that is how I have to help them to learn”. Terry was saying that it is not possible to put learners into policy boxes.

Abnormalising is my interpretation of the relationships and interactions between learners and policy. Len (pmkr1) contributed to this process with his comments that policy-makers “... get it wrong [because a] policy maker can only make good policy provided they can put it into boxes” (Len, pmkr1). He said that the reality is that learners come in all different shapes and will not conform to boxes. Len said: “How do you get policy to cover it? It is far easier to look at a mess if it is in boxes. We are now back to putting all the boxes back together [for effective policy]” (Len, pmkr1). Around this and other evidence, emerged “blunt policy” which I next discuss.

### **5.5.2.2 Blunt Policy**

The codes in this category of abnormalising demonstrated a lot of casting about for direction amidst policy that some, probably many, regarded as dysfunctional and blunt. Tony (pmkr2) said that this was a highly complex policy area that should recognise industry demands but also “The more people are participating the more they generate growth and wealth; the economy needs equity” (Tony, pmkr2). Pat (pmkr1) expressed frustration that policy chaos had caused loss of fundamental recognition that the prospect of work helped learners to learn. Pat (pmkr1) said this was complex and difficult but: “... in equity policy, I do think the economic argument is quite powerful” (Pat, pmkr1). Policy-makers shared codes of trying to “solve the unintended consequences of primary policy through equity” (Billy, pmkr1); trying to “define the discourses” around equity (Billy, pmkr1); and “representing equity land as reserve labour supply” (Pat, pmkr1). Policy-makers commented often on the need for recognising the capability of learners; of looking with fresh eyes as to who it is that is disadvantaged – older people, for example, were “falling off in class rooms” (Pat, pmkr1).

The category of abnormalising emerged as an interplay with all categories of the substantive grounded theory on three counts. First, it is abnormalising policy that sets up adult learners in VET equity programs to aim to be productive in the workplace *as an objective* of their education. Second, the consequence of the drive for productivity and for quantitative outcomes undermines reform that

will focus on learner disposition in the classroom as opposed to fitness for the workplace, and the counting of credentials. Third, in the silent blueprint the category of abnormalising policy recognises social categorisation approaches which are a denial of rights because they exclude people from mainstream learning. I next coalesce discussion of categories to represent the core category of “teaching dilemma”.

### **5.5.3 Teaching Dilemma: Interaction of Categories**

The core category of “teaching dilemma” occurred to me early in theorising as I saw it first as an inevitable consequence of absence of insight and learner disposition. I had already memo’ed about symbols and interaction that should be explored in policy but were not. I wrote many observations about how what was “normal” is, or should be, represented in symbols. This gave rise to greater clarification of the importance of making realities visible through interpretation of traditions and dilemmas; traditions and dilemmas help to define what is “normal”, or “abnormal”, for learners (as well as other actors in the VET sector). I constantly wrote observations about what was “abnormal” about the context and conditions of collection of empirical material. Again, traditions and dilemmas figured as a mismatch with assumptions made in policy settings, e.g. that all learners experiencing disadvantage should experience skills development with the goal of serving industry.

The theory deepened as the inexorable push and pull between educational practice and policy implementation emerged. On the one hand, implementers and practitioners are striving to make learners normal for a perceived normal world. On the other hand, the complexity of disadvantage for learners is not understood. e

ConGT is founded on tenets of analysis of process and action (Charmaz, 2014). I had theorised “problematic equity” because the intellectual puzzle could not be resolved; the process was unambiguous and the action was more non-action and therefore ambivalent. However, as I stood back and reflected on the core categories, I began to memo, and code, observations about symbolic interaction.

## **5.6 Observations and Symbolic Interaction**

In this section, I use observations as a source of evidence. I draw attention to the cohesion of responses among participants as well as differences between how teachers and trainers were feeling about their work compared to government and RTO policy-makers and providers. I follow with discussion of the theoretical perspective of symbolic interaction.

### 5.6.1 Observation as Source of Evidence

There was overall cohesion among public, private and community providers with regard to their responses to interview questions. Alex (pmkr2) said “...there is enormous goodwill amongst everybody” in addressing skills for learners experiencing disadvantage. The public providers referred more often to a broader political and economic context. Their interview codes drew out forward planning, a “railing against” training for non-existent jobs (Riley, Pat and Max, all pmkr1s). Private providers tended to focus on advocacy for change, and strategising to find ways to attract funding to build on equity programs which is considered to be a “growing area” (Toni, pmkr2). The community perspective was around emphasising that learning was about creating an opportunity to earn, that pathway planning was ineffective. The theorising with regard to public, private and community providers showed a good deal in common where they were “U-turning to enhance existing skills/sense of worth/on basis of learner needs”. Providers are “layering outcomes” (Alex, pmkr2; Tony, pmkr2) or setting objectives with “learners in the centre” with the ultimate aim of public and private benefit for learners. With variation in emphases on issues, all providers expressed views consistent with a dilemma in teaching and training and all demonstrated deep and often personal commitment to helping learners experiencing disadvantage.

Generally, teachers and trainers in public, private and community RTOs appeared committed and motivated. My recorded observations were frequently that teachers might be anxious, tired and stressed. However, coding around their interviews was influenced by the feelings of high expectations they had for learners experiencing disadvantage because of the amazement they could engender in learners. Teachers and trainers could be positive in “identifying [opportunities], loving to train, and marvelling at learners’ persistence”. This coding had more positive aspects than the coding of policy-makers’ interviews. Codes from policy-makers’ interviews were less positive and included: “railing against; lamenting; deploring; denouncing” present policy formulation and implementation.

### 5.6.2 Symbolic Interactionism

As I formed the substantive grounded theory, I increasingly turned to symbolic interactionism (3.7). I reviewed research based on symbolic interactionism (Anderson & Snow, 2001; Marvesti & McKinney, 2011; Morris, 2012) and came to see the power of this theoretical perspective as a way of analysing micro, meso and macro interactions and issues of inequality. Anderson and Snow (2000) drew attention to manifestations of inequality as reduced participation of people experiencing disadvantage in life’s opportunities. Further, through symbolic interactionism, they identified

“waiting” as a manifestation of inequality for those who are low on the ladder of power. “Waiting” was an evocative symbol in the process of the learners experiencing disadvantage in this study.

I came to see the key policy instrument of NPASR (Chapter 2) as a symbol around which key players, and learners, interact and make meaning of teaching, training and learning. Skills development policy and reform, and equity, involves a harmonised arrangement among the Australian Government and states and territories determined at a governance level by COAG (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b) (2.4). This symbolising of governance caused me to look further at other matters that had taken on a symbolic status for participants in the study.

Governance was symbolic in the substantive grounded theory as a matter of “collision”. At this highest level “politics and policy collide” (Billy, pmkr1) and equity is “going awry” (Glenn, pmkr1) as a symbol of “a feared policy position” (Billy, pmkr1). Equity outcomes are unattainable within of the industry-demand focus for productivity where industry requirements drive policy benchmarks (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b) (2.4). Productivity itself becomes an unintended symbol of policy to be feared.

In this way, expectations of learners’ progress, or lack of it, is determined with reference to their potential to provide industry with skills. The substantive grounded theory proposes that within this context and under these conditions, there is a culture in the broader community that is so apparently entrenched that it becomes symbolic, of “low expectations” (Tony, Riley and Alex, all pmkr2s) about the capability of learners experiencing disadvantage. Many RTO and government policy-makers argued that the potential of learners experiencing disadvantage – within and outside the VET system – is underestimated; that it is wrong to design policy for skills development based on low expectations of learners.

For government and RTO policy-makers and providers, the empirical evidence and theory comes together so that they seek a “viable reality” (Riley, pmkr2) and more positive symbols to achieve productivity as well as social inclusion goals (Taylor, tchr). In the confusion of negative symbols and problematic equity, the constant theorising relates to public administration and policy analysis where participants are railing against absence of meaningful measures. Intertwined are symbols arising from social categorisation that devalue learners’ love of learning. Symbols of commodifying learners give rise to the code “rejecting social categorisation”. Collectively, micro, meso and macro theorising comes down to interaction of symbols of interaction between productivity, equity, expectations of learners experiencing disadvantage and the way in which they are categorised. The ever pervasive overlay is a Tasmania “haunted by history” (Glen, pmkr1) and its position as an “equity state” (Billy,

pmkr1) relative to the other states of Australia. It is important not to lose sight of local cultural, social and economic influences when designing policy in an increasingly globalised world.

In summary, the substantive grounded theory is that equity is problematic from perspectives of interactions of governance, public administration and policy analysis. Equity is problematic because the interaction should be, but is not, the process of governance setting positive and achievable goals; public administration taking responsibility to provide a viable reality; and policy analysis representing learners in a manner that is not discriminatory and which makes positive disposition and capability visible. In methodological terms, this is setting up consistency of philosophy and praxis. “Problematic equity” is an interaction of symbols showing that high-level governance is having a negative effect on how providers provide programs, how teachers teach and how learners learn.

## 5.7 Chapter Summary

The substantive grounded theory delivers theory relevant to the intellectual puzzle of how equity might be embedded into skills policy. The empirical evidence revealed that there are interconnecting issues of governance especially as this relates to the NPASR setting productivity objectives based primarily on industry demand for skills development. There are also matters of public administration and policy analysis in that there are issues of social categorisation and learner voices involved. The substantive grounded theory addresses the intellectual puzzle in particular ways:

- the learner may be interpreted for situation in policy positions through the theorised learner disposition which involves a process of accommodating terror, loving to learn, being amazed and waiting to see, together with contextualising traditions and dilemmas;
- with core categories that emerged from evidence and which framed central properties of policy, learning and teaching within “problematic equity”.

I represent the substantive grounded theory through problematic equity comprised of core categories of absence of policy insight, absence of learner disposition and teaching dilemma and I also voice the theory through particular participants. In Chapter 6, I explore the substantive grounded theory through discussion involving comparison with the literature and with reference to the substantive grounded theory.

# Chapter 6: Towards a Formal Theory: Alternative Equity Comprising Neo-Equity and Embedded Equity

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## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter compares literature with the substantive grounded theory of “problematic equity” (Chapter 5). The comparison takes the theory to new levels of abstraction and towards a potential formal theory of “alternative equity” which emerges from comparison of the literature with the substantive grounded theory of “problematic equity” (Chapter 5). Formal theory is “... theoretical rendering of a generic issue or process that cuts across several substantive areas of study” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 343). This chapter positions theory across several substantive areas of study that, in later research, may potentially be theoretically tested to specify the “links between concepts” (Charmaz, 2014).

“Problematic equity” emerged from induction of evidence to drive the substantive grounded theory engaging issues of problematic governance, public administration and policy analysis with regard to equity and skills policy. The categories of “absence of policy insight”, “absence of learner disposition” and “teaching dilemma” interact with negative symbols related to governance of skills policy. The symbols lie in policy-makers’ fear of equity as a concept, in employers’ low expectations of learners experiencing disadvantage and the disadvantage intrinsic to traditions and dilemmas in Tasmania (5.3.5). A contribution of this study is that the interaction within and between the categories and the symbols appears to affect the behaviour of all participants in the study (5.2) in a problematic manner; there are problems with equity governance, public administration and policy analysis and these trickle down to affect classrooms generally and learners experiencing disadvantage in particular.

Coupled with this problematic interaction is the problematic context (Chapter 2) to skills policy in relation to learners experiencing disadvantage. A contribution of this study is that learner disposition not being appropriately recognised in governance of skills policy. Further, matters of equity are subsumed within workforce development objectives; there is a prevailing equity gap where there is concern about low quality of teaching and training of learners experiencing disadvantage (e.g.

Beddie, 2015; Department of Education and Training, 2016b; Lamb et al., 2015; McVicar & Tabasso, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2011).

In this chapter, I first discuss:

- Representation of theorising towards a formal theory which includes Figure 6.1 setting out the main headings of this chapter. It is to be read from the bottom up as it denotes the shift from substantive grounded theory and moves upwards towards considerations of a formal theory (3.8).

I then “imagine forward (Lather, 2013) and organise the chapter into the following five parts:

- the literature comparison with each core category of the substantive grounded theory of problematic equity;
- towards a formal theory of alternative equity comprised of neo-equity and embedded equity;
- response to the intellectual puzzle and research questions: embedded equity;
- features of governance of equity.

## 6.2 Representation of Theorising Towards a Formal Theory

Consistent with conGT, the combination of substantive grounded theory and comparison with the literature forms a “springboard” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 32, 79) towards formal theory. Where Chapter 2 focuses on literature as context to potential formal theory, in this chapter the literature aims to follow the natural development (Charmaz 2014) of theorising of categories of “absence of policy insight”, “absence of learner disposition” and “teaching dilemma”.

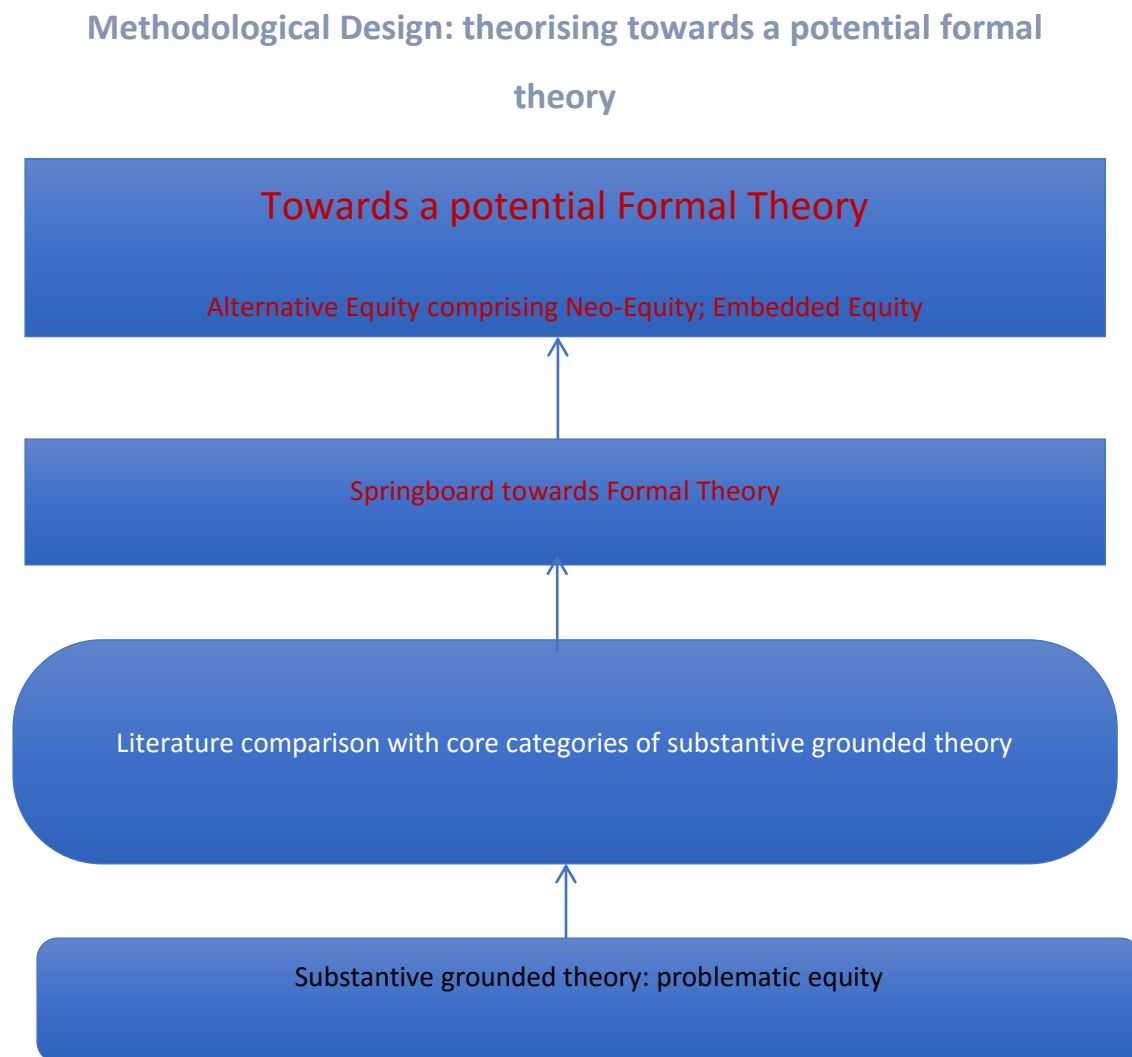
The representation of theory generally and how to use the literature in grounded theory can still be a “polemic and divisive issue” (Dunne, 2011, p. 113). Consistent with conGT (Charmaz, 2014), and an approach of “theoretical agnosticism” (Dunne, 2011, p. 119), the literature essentially lay fallow during fieldwork and analysis. The literature was first invoked strategically after analysis of empirical evidence to contextualise the intellectual puzzle. Similarly to Dunne (2011), attention to literature came well after analysis of evidence.

I found the lack of literature on theorising and representing formal theory problematic. Charmaz (2014) provides a definition but deals lightly with formal theory. I was late into the study before I realised that in a PhD, it is unlikely that a formal theory will be developed; the essential theoretical testing across substantive areas is beyond the scope of the usual thesis. I focused on comparison in



this chapter to so that the literature “... extends, transcends, or challenges” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 305) the substantive grounded theory and moves towards a formal theory.

Figure 6.1 sets out in diagram the representation of theorising towards a formal theory of this chapter.



**Figure 6.1: Methodological Design: Theorising Towards a Potential Formal Theory**

## 6.3 Literature Comparison

The literature comparison involves:

- literature comparison with observations which were memo’ed;
- literature comparison with categories and core categories of the substantive grounded theory;

- at the end of comparison with each core category, how each core category moves towards the formal theory.

I preface this section with analysis of how the substantive grounded theory became an interaction of core categories.

### 6.3.1 Observations: Interactions of Core Categories

I came to theorise that there is interaction of core categories of the substantive grounded theory.

The interactive process engaged symbols of governance, public administration and policy analysis affecting actions and meaning-making of government and institutional policy-makers as well as learners experiencing disadvantage.

There were three aspects of literature comparison which caused an evolution from basic substantive grounded theory to interactive substantive grounded theory. First, my attention was caught by the salience to my study of “... there is now a greater attention to the *interplay* between the ideas and perceptions of actors, their networks, their stakeholders ... not just in government but also in the third sector” (my emphasis) (Head & Crowley, 2015, p. 15). Second, I had noted that Figgis et al. (2007) had reflected on *interactions* (p. 10) within and across RTOs and their communities and developed an “ecological perspective” (p. 10) as a tool to stimulate insights. Third, I engaged with the research of Richards and Farrokhnia (2016) which was published after the substantive grounded theory and formal theory of this study were formed. Richards and Farrokhnia (2016) innovated to take conGT into a policy study and optimised the opportunity in VET to go beyond the grounded theory focus on evidence from interviews. The authors emphasised that the *interplay* (Richards and Farrokhnia, 2016, p. 1) of key concepts and words (and actions and behaviour) emerged as central to authentic and complex problem solving.

In this study, I had also first analysed theory as an interplay. However, with reference to the literature and theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism together with situated interpretivism (3.7), I came to recognise that it was meaning through symbolic interactionism that was driving the theory. The substantive grounded theory recognises the action and process of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 34); it recognises the interaction, interpretation, symbols and meaning that form human conduct (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mead, 1959). This study is different from others in drawing attention of the effects of policy objectives on human and organisational behaviour ; it highlights the influence of “symbols” of policy intention. I now move to the comparison of the literature with categories of the substantive

grounded theory in which I draw attention that I am theorising in terms of an interactive substantive grounded theory.

### **6.3.2 Core Category: Absence of Policy Insight**

The core category of “absence of policy insight” (Figure 5.1) comprised the categories of productivity and equity with related categories demand-industry and equity/human rights respectively. The substantive grounded theory represents the intersection between equity and an approach to productivity. This is not productivity *per se*; it is governance of productivity and associated skills training that is dominated by industry demand which subsumes the interests of learners experiencing disadvantage. No participant devalued productivity as an important objective of skills policy and the importance of developing workforce skills.

Further, the empirical evidence was that most learners experiencing disadvantage have potential to grow and to contribute to productivity objectives (5.4.2). However, the dominance of the industry voice conflicted with principles of equity and potential opportunity for learners experiencing disadvantage to have the benefits of fairness and inclusion. In a cross-disciplinary search of the literature, I found no argument with the substantive grounded theory of this study that equity is problematic in VET. Further, academic researchers were reflecting practitioners’ concerns with the prevailing governance and administration in education generally (Lingard et al., 2014). In the following sections, I discuss the core category of “absence of policy insight” with reference to: productivity through industry demand for skills; and equity as human rights.

#### **6.3.2.1 Productivity through Industry Demand for Skills**

The first core category may have been many things (5.3). However, the axial coding which illuminated diverse positions in terms of “more” and “less” (4.11.2.3) produced a core category which is the juxtaposition of equity, and productivity defined in terms of industry demand, and that these are issues of decision-making at high-level governance. The term “perverse” is applied when participants lament that the present structure is not delivering equity as fairness and social inclusion nor productivity outcomes for learners experiencing disadvantage (5.3.4). The substantive grounded theory also conceptualises interaction of issues of governance, public administration and public policy (5.3.4). In the next sections, I compare the literature from the past decade with reference to: absence of policy insight in governance of VET; consequences of absence of policy insight; fairness and inclusion; respect for the learner; and, symbols and language such as the neo-social.

In 2007, Figgis et al. (2007) claimed a key finding after extensive Australia-wide research that equity had “lost traction in Australian policy” (p. 8). Figgis et al. reported that it may have been

unintentional but there was “... nonetheless, a widespread belief that the industry focus has eclipsed the sector’s social purpose of countering disadvantage” (p. 13). Figgis et al. recommended a renewed high-level governance focus on equity as a matter of principle implying fairness (p. 7). In 2015, Beddie (2015, p. 13), in a report commissioned by NCVER engaging numerous VET commentators and published well after the substantive grounded theory of this study was developed, similarly affirmed the appropriateness of the term “absence of policy insight” and the need for a renewed focus of governance in the skills sector. Beddie (2015) drew attention to the fact that NCVER’s research priorities that were set in 2010 did not, and ought to have, included focus on governance arrangements, institutional structure and policy settings (p. 13). A contribution of this study may be to inform future NCVER research priorities with grounded evidence in the context of governance and administration. .

The consequences of absence of policy insight in governance are demonstrated by Figgis et al. (2007) and Beddie (2015, p. 14) in ways similar to the substantive grounded theory which found influences on behaviour of providers, teachers and trainers and learners. Figgis et al. (2007) expounded the importance of merging top-down and bottom-up approaches with regard to equity policy because the consequence without this is likely to be poor outcomes for students. Connell (2013b) argued that marketisation, and related privatisation, of itself produces inequity, and inequality. and does this persistently in education generally. The consequences, Connell argued (2013a), undermine “Commitments to knowledge, and to principles of justice and equality ...” which strive to continue “... however much they struggle for institutional presence” (p. 110). However, Connell (2013a) argued the slide to national and international market forces that are averse to equity is well advanced and this kind of governance has implications for all areas of education. In 2015, Beddie’s research also drew attention to the problematic influences on behaviour of down-the-line policy-makers and actors in the VET sector when governance arrangements were not clearly articulated (p. 13). The substantive grounded theory constantly drew attention that policy-makers and providers as well as teachers, trainers and learners (5.3.4) are affected by high-level policy. It can be inferred that good governance will have a positive effect in skills development and lack of clarity in governance will have the opposite.

National and international literature informed the substantive grounded theory in its approach to productivity defined as demand by industry and whether and how it relates to equity as fairness and inclusion. Nationally, 11 years ago, Considine, Watson and Hall (2005) had argued similarly to the substantive grounded theory from an education perspective that workforce development policy was perverse. From the authors’ perspective, reform was required for how marginalised people are

considered in policy. In addition, governance principles needed to recognise that social goals are to be balanced with economic goals. Considine et al. (2005) argued that: “Indeed, in some instances, particularly where multiple disadvantages have to be overcome, the achievement of social goals may be a necessary precursor to the achievement of economic ones” (p. 12). Five years later, Perkins (2010), in comparative research within Australia, in the United Kingdom and the European Union, defined workforce development goals and equity as perverse goals are targeted towards reducing welfare payments, not towards social inclusion. Perkins (2010) argued that productivity strategies delivered some better outcomes for less disadvantaged learners but not for more disadvantaged learners. Perkins argued for more research and insight into the synergies between labour force agendas and equity. This is entirely consistent with the substantive grounded theory. Macro, meso and micro theorising is that there is absence of policy insight that the dominance of labour force agendas undermines the potential for better equity outcomes (5.4).

Other research reflected the substantive grounded theory where participants argued for more respect for the learner and did so with considerable emotion (5.4.2). Angus, Golding, Foley and Lavender (2013) advocated for new respect for student equity. Angus et al. berate the dominance of the voice of business and industry in Australia “... that has, for the last 20 years at least, unashamedly dominated the VET policy discourse” (p. 560). The authors argue that the students have different needs to business and industry (Angus et al., p. 563). Sellar and Gale (2011) argued this position as well, seeking a “new structure of feeling for student equity...” (p. 115), lamenting post-war Australia’s approach to learners as human capital resulting in focus on participation and attainment targets. In Europe, Desjardins and Rubenson (2013), similarly to Angus et al. (2013), posited that public demand for skills is not necessarily aligned with employer demand. Their position is that investment in education is an investment in equity and a dominant industry voice in skills policy will not achieve this. Examples of policy responses included avoiding dead-end training, promoting non-traditional students and fostering flexible and responsive programs including community learning (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013). It is this demonstrated nexus between the effects on participants of the study of industry-dominated skills policy and equity that is of key interest to this study.

The substantive grounded theory referenced lack of conceptual symbols and language. Beddie (2015) alluded to the absence of conceptual language when she referred to the propensity of research to focus on “reiteration of the problems” (p. 18) rather than on providing concepts for looking to solutions. Academic researchers are beginning to provide symbols and language to articulate the complexities of the interaction between industry-dominated productivity goals and equity. In the literature, some language emerged to encapsulate ideas as tools to take debate forward. Savage

(2013) develops the term “neo-social” (p. 187) to embrace the incompatibility of the productivity/equity phenomenon of this study which emerged in the substantive grounded theory. “Neo-social” involves the fusion of social capital and human capital where the idea of equity is present in policy but “primarily for the sake of fostering greater economic productivity” (Savage, 2013, p. 187). This is exemplified in the substantive grounded theory where productivity is an objective in the primary Council of Australian Governments (COAG, 2012b) agreement and equity is an outcome. “Neo-social” illuminates the theorising also that participants did not know how to define or to think about equity (5.3). As Savage (2013) predicted, there is a transformation of equity as it moves away from definitions of fairness and inclusion and these “... melted into the domain of economic governance” (p. 187).

The core category of “absence of policy insight” reflected the neo-social interpretation which researchers (Angus et al., 2013; Patrick, 2013; Sellar & Gale, 2011) argue limits the space for respecting learners experiencing disadvantage in Australia. As Angus et al., Sellar and Gale, and Lingard and Savage represented, macro positions advocating economic growth objectives are moving further away from consideration of rights at the micro – learner – level. Furthermore, my interpretation is that this is consistent with global policy developments where it appears that the OECD publications of the past decade and most recently of 2015 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015a) appear to endorse the nuances of the “neo-social” in their emphasis on equity as a means for advancing economic growth, e.g. “higher inequality drives down economic growth” (p. 5).

Lingard, Sellar and Savage (2014) take the neo-social further to argue that social justice has been “re-articulated” (p. 711) through the language of “governance technology” or the “technical and numerical mediation to measure equity ...” (p. 711). They note that governance technology is commonly represented in the empirical bases of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the OECD-based PISA. The significance is that “governance technology” is an insight into what is happening (Lingard et al., 2014) as social justice comes to be “untethered” (Lingard et al., 2014) by language from “... implicit values and norms” (p. 713). Patrick (2013) agreed with the idea of social justice being untethered. Patrick argued stridently for reclaiming of the goals of education generally at both policy and institutional levels and proposed that present policy engaged in “commodification” (p. 4) of the learner which is disrespectful of the humanity of the learner. The theory of this study is that commodification of people translates to absence of insight into the human rights imperative in VET and education generally.

In summary, the substantive grounded theory reflected researchers' concerns that VET research agendas neglected getting governance objectives right. Neglected objectives include social goals of VET (Considine et al., 2005; Angus et al., 2013; Lingard et al., 2014; Patrick, 2013; Savage et al., 2013) and respect for learners experiencing disadvantage. This study theorises that there are problematic consequences of the neo-social approach and the use of governance technology. First, providers, teachers and trainers, realigned and redesigned government-imposed criteria "off the side of the desk" (5.3.4). They see these criteria as delivered down to them to produce outcomes which they know learners experiencing disadvantage can achieve. Second, learners experienced the productivity goal at the bottom of the food chain and can be disadvantaged by the re-articulation of equity itself. We see this exemplified especially in the category of "waiting to see" in learner disposition (5.4.4) which is an abrupt halt to previous positive engagement with learning. The nexus between productivity and equity is complex, multi-faceted and misunderstood by participants in this study and according to the literature.

I next extend the theorising of perspectives of equity. These perspectives are: equity as human rights; equity as a public value; equity in public administration; and equity in policy analysis.

### **6.3.2.2 Equity as Human Rights**

We don't know how to talk about equity (Pat, pmkr1)

I compared the substantive grounded theory with policy positions and literature in political science, education and public administration. These were contextual (Chapter 2) and located theory of absence of policy insight in the governance framework of the NPASR (2.4) and in academic literature as to the definition of equity as a matter of human rights.

Pat (pmkr1) (5.3) reflected the views of many when he said, "We don't know how to talk about equity". Equity as a matter of human rights did not appear in participants' responses in interviews and the contextual literature showed the absence of insight within governance and policy as well (2.5). Subsequent contextual analysis revealed also that policy was not engaging the principles of equal opportunity, the duty of policy-makers to protect and the duty to promote (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012; DDA; COAG, 2013; Office of Anti-Discrimination Commission, n.d.). Since the theory in this study was developed, the AHRC (2015a) in *Australia's Second Universal Periodic Review*, reported:

There remains a need for ongoing human rights education across the *public sector*, in the administration of justice and places of detention, within the tertiary and *vocational education sector* and across the community [my emphasis] AHRC (2015a).

The AHRC (2015a) noted that Australia's activities for the World Program for Human Rights Education had been ad hoc and recommended that: "... Government expands its support for human rights education initiatives, including targeted initiatives for public officials" (p. 5). Unless human rights are drawn into public policy, there will continue to be problematic equity.

The core category of absence of policy insight was illuminated by analysis through the lens of the Star's (1995) "silent blueprint" (3.8.3) Star (1995) encouraging researchers to "study the unstudied", to listen to "... another kind of pattern – patterns of the invisibles, such as silences, omissions, areas of neglect" (p. 266). The "unstudied" gave rise to the synthesis of human rights (Figure 2.1). In the synthesis (Figure 2.1), I highlight the influence of international human rights and the political, moral and legal responsibilities to govern, publicly administer and conduct policy analysis regarding respect for the learner as well as for fairness and inclusion. While equity is a matter of human rights, the AHRC (2009, p. 3) and Commissioners of the AHRC, Watchirs and Costello (2015) make a significant cautionary note: the processes for initiating actions are a complex journey through tensions between parliamentary and Supreme court oversight; through problems of who can bring actions; barriers are costly and time commitments in bringing a Supreme Court action and the lack of financial remedy to offset costs.

The AHRC (2009) argues for building blocks to ensure moral and political obligations, and the law, are upheld. Those multiple building blocks require that parliament, government decision-makers and courts make human rights central to law, policy and services. With building blocks in place, there is opportunity for conversation about human rights culture and support for learners experiencing disadvantage (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2006). A matter is the right of people experiencing disadvantage to have support services.

Perkins (2010, p. 275) drew attention to the need for support services to genuinely include learners experiencing disadvantage in VET. Beddie (2015) Leung, McVicar, Polidano and Zhang (2014) show that for learners experiencing disadvantage tailored support can make a difference to outcomes. Leung et al (2014) report positive outcomes for learners generally in the experimental demand-driven VET policy in the Australian state of Victoria. This builds on the research of other analysts (Beddie, 2015; Perkins, 2010) and reflects the 2016 government National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) (Council of Australian Governments, 2013) which acknowledges support rights for people experiencing the disadvantage of disability. As the AHRC (2015a) proposes, change comes through human rights education together with policy frameworks to improve outcomes for learners experiencing disadvantage. In consulting the "synthesis of human rights" (Figure 2.1), it is evident



that support in VET for learners experiencing disadvantage is fundamental. This matter invites consideration of equity as a public value which I next discuss.

### **6.3.2.3 Equity as Public Value**

In Chapter 5 (p. 159), Riley (pmkr2) directly lamented the lack of focus on equity as a public value in skills policy and as a normative position in public policy generally. His comments were corroborated by learners, teachers, trainers and policy-makers in this study who espoused the value of focusing on equity for individuals and for the broader community. This is a matter of public administration which is arguably transitioning from NPM to NPG (2.6.2). Riley did not know it but his comment echoes literature highlighting the call for NPG that is based on public values.

Kelly, Mulgan and Muers (2002), in proposing public sector reform in the United Kingdom, posit a public-value focus because public value is neglected in contemporary public administration i.e. the NPM paradigm. A public-value focus they suggest: "... addresses issues such as equity, ethos and accountability" (p. 3). Moore (2013), too, evaluates the new public management paradigm and proposes that re-evaluation is needed for a society that is "... not just prosperous but fair and just" (p. 9). In Australian literature, Kearns (2004) proposed that a public-value perspective in vocational education and training involves a public, longer-term value of learning. Kearns (2004) argued that this will involve placing the learner at the centre of the learning activity, promoting lifelong learning, and recognising the distinction between training and learning. A public-value perspective in Kearns's (2004) terms will call for a fundamental, systemic shift in how vocational education is organised and delivered, how it promotes equity and motivates learning among all members of the community for all their lives. Kearns is consistent with research that equity is a normative value (Bozeman and Johnson, 2014; Bryson, Crosby and Bloomberg, 2014).

Bryson et al. (2014) consider public value as a "hot topic" (p. 445) although Alfred and O'Flynn (2009) point out that ideas of public-value management are at least two decades old (p. 3). Rhodes and Wanna (2007) welcome the public-value debate as counterpoint to a new public-management paradigm; not since the 1980s, they argue, has the public-value concept been a significant part of public sector reform. However, Rhodes and Wanna (2007) emphasise that much clarity has yet to come as to whether the public-value concept is philosophical or operational. I interpreted from Riley's comment that his quest for considerations of equity as public value is philosophical and operational. Further, the public-value concept may provide a lens through which to think about equity and human rights. I discuss later in this section who decides what public value is and how it is managed.

Historical and contemporary views of public value have common threads. Stoker (2006) and Bryson et al. (2014) propose that we are responding to “...the challenges of a networked, multi-sector, no-one-wholly-in-charge world ...” (p. 445). Stoker (2006) argues that the networked system of governance is more compatible with public-value management which is of interest to this study where a system is sought that will recognise human values. Stoker (2006) argues for public-value management compatible with the “market-oriented version” (Stoker, 2006, p. 42) of public administration. The statement is highly reflective of the theorising of perverse policy (5.3.4) in the substantive grounded theory where policy-makers and educators alike railed against conflicting objectives in market-driven skills policy.. Significantly for this study, Kearns (2004) pointed out that Australian equity policy is not viable when it is disinvesting in people below Certificate III level while Britain and other countries allocated targets for improved skills development for all learners. That position has not changed in 2016 (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b). Kearns’s position reflects the substantive grounded theory as it advocates equity as a public value and recognition of public value is a positive symbol with which to create a viable reality for conscientious policy-makers and teachers and trainers.

Empirically and theoretically, the substantive grounded theory showed a desire for application of equity as public value in policy. It highlighted the gap that exists between the practice of public administrators and the research of academics. Practitioners are seeking clarification of issues and are unaware of the work of academic commentators in this area. I next look at literature about public administration as the paradigm within which equity is situated.

### ***6.3.2.4 Equity in Public Administration***

We should create a viable reality for conscientious policy-makers (and teachers).

(Len, pmkr2; Tony, pmkr2)

Research shows that emotions of all participants matter in analysis of public administration (Strauss, 1987) (5.3.4). The category of “absence of policy insight” y recognised participants’ ethical concerns and how these emerged as matters of both professional and personal concern. The subsequent theorising took me further into investigation of research into public values because the emotions of policy-makers and teachers and trainers were suggesting concern about an absence of values in equity policy.

In Chapter 5, Pat said: “there is enormous goodwill among the providers...” (p. 182). Further, my memo’ed observation in the field research was that, despite anticipated tensions between private and public providers at least partly arising from competition law, that there is genuine engagement

by RTO and government policy-makers about equity. More, there is frustration about how to represent evidence and measure outcomes in equity. In 2007, Figgis et al. (2007) had found and emphasised all levels of policy and process in six TAFE institutes within their field research were “united in their desire to align equity practice and strategy ...” (p. 8). Angus et al. (2013) shared this perspective following their research involving a range of actors in the VET policy and provider field. They pointed out that while social justice values have lost traction in policy, “... such values appear to be still widely held, at least tacitly, by many of the participants ...” (Angus et al., 2013, p. 571). Angus et al. found this surprising especially as, similarly to this study, many of the participants were senior managers developing policy around the demand-industry model of productivity objectives. A contribution of this study is to identify the ways in which policy-makers are feeling uncomfortable within the new public management paradigm.

Further, a contribution of this study is that actors within the broader networked sector of VET are feeling similarly to government officers. Within the complex array of “intra- and cross-sectoral collaborations” (Bryson, 2014, p. 453), additional non-government players will take on accountability, and claim involvement in, formulation and implementation of policy engaging with public value, such as equity – Bryson et al. (2014) referred to these as “public spirited managers from across sectors ...” (p. 446). Stoker (2006) argued similarly to the substantive grounded theory that ethical motivation at work is important and the “bonds of partnership enable things to get done that no amount of rule-setting or incentive providing can deliver” (p. 51). Rhodes and Wanna (2007) contribute to this theorising in suggesting that committed public managers are searching for new ways to “affirm their self-worth” (p. 7) and the public-value debate is a way to do that. The substantive grounded theory found similarly that there is a search by policy-makers and educationalists across sectors for ethical engagement with regard to learners experiencing disadvantage.

In summary, the substantive grounded theory (Chapter 5) extended and transcended the research literature that RTO and government policy-makers are strongly engaged professionally but also personally and, at times, emotionally with the concept of equity. The governance discourse may appear to focus on industry needs but there is also empirical and theoretical opinion that other ways need to be found to respond to learners experiencing disadvantage for ethical as well as productivity reasons. One policy-maker expressed this in terms of the need to find ways to engage “conscientious policy-makers” (Len, pmkr2, Chapter 5, p. 88) while another saw it also as a way of recognising the involvement of teachers and trainers as educators (Tony, pmkr2, Chapter 5, p. 182). Stoker (2006) argued for a whole new public administration paradigm to address public values, including equity.

The paradigm of public administration needs to be considered in association with how government evidence for policy is analysed. This I deal with in the next section with reference to equity and policy.

### **6.3.2.5 Equity in Policy Analysis**

A preliminary observation on the synthesis of human rights (Figure 2.1) is that policy analysis should include “basic standards by which we identify and measure inequality and fairness”. Policy analysis which is informed by evidence about equity is intrinsic to a human rights imperative. It is notable that in 2016 for the first time there is acknowledgement that there is especially limited data about people experiencing disadvantage (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2016b).

The substantive grounded theory pointed to absence about equity in skills policy and absence of knowledge that policy analysis needs strengthening, including with regard to human rights education (5.3). I theorise that RTO and government policy-makers are floundering to go beyond a description of issues of equity in skills development policy and into constructive strategy (5.3). (Chapter 5, p. 139)). Many policy-makers recognised that the course to better outcomes lies in improved integration of input from diverse government and non-government stakeholders, including learners. This grounded theory directed attention to the nature of policy analysis especially in Australia.

When I explored the literature contextually, I found concern among qualitative researchers (Denzin, 2014; Denzin & Giardina, 2009). and in the traditional home of policy analyst in political science (di Francesco, 2015, p. 261; Stoker & Taylor-Gooby, 2013). The shared concern is about the absence of methodology theory in policy analysis as well as in public policy (Byron & Thatcher, 2015). Locke (2015) promotes the value of evolved grounded theory within organisational studies and exhorts management professionals to see beyond the traditional classic grounded theory to the richer, more complex (p. 614) grounded theory that has evolved in methodology. Veltri, Lim and Miller (Veltri et al., 2014) echoed concern in the theory of this study about the inadequacy of policy analysis which, although of academic interest, is not diffusing to government policy.

While there is no clearly identifiable policy analysis profession in Australia and other countries (Head & Crowley, 2015, p. 15), the new, comparative, *International Library of Policy Analysis* is testament to broadening enquiry into policy analysis within and beyond government. There is distinction between policy analysis undertaken by the public service practitioner and that which is taught in universities and undertaken by academics: the former is analysis “for” and the latter is analysis “of” (Botterill & Fenna, 2013). Historical analysis will show why and how through periods of economic rationalism and conceptual dominance of efficiency and effectiveness, practitioner policy analysis is founded in

quantitative research while the purview of academic analysis broadens to qualitative (Fenna, 2015, p. 42).

The challenge to public policy that is more plural and pluralistic is bringing forth new research into the nature of policy analysis within government. Traditionally, policy analysis by Australian practitioners is a pragmatic process not founded in systematic methodology; there is a gap between the two communities of policy practitioners and academic policy researchers (Head & Walter, 2015, p. 254). However, the interplay between ideas and actors across government, not for profit and private networks is now a matter of research (Head & Crowley, 2015, p. 15). In the substantive grounded theory, an interplay was being sought as participants within government, private and community sectors, struggled to find a way to talk together about equity.

The substantive grounded theory theorised about a failure of policy, especially state-based, analysis generally and regarding human rights. Hajer and Waganeer (2003) argued for new ways of doing policy analysis generally while Phillimore and Arkley (2015) argue for the desirability of state-based policy analysis founded on state and Commonwealth partnerships – which VET policy is. There is a “lack of state-focused academic policy research” (Phillimore & Arkley, 2015, p. 88) which diminishes the quality of policy analysis and subsequent decision-making. In addition, policy analysis needs new symbols and language to represent meaning in public administration, especially regarding equity. New analysis is needed to recognise a plural and pluralistic environment such as we see in this study with its interactions of public, private and community RTOs.

Policy analysis became a singularly important part of the process of understanding opportunities for change in VET from governance through to strategy and process. Beddie (2015, p. 32) laments the previously “immature” (p. 32) acceptance of the role of the market in previous NCVET research. Beddie argues for research that will envision the complexities of the marketised future (Beddie, p.32). Nationally, and internationally, there are new, emerging moves for an improved policy analysis paradigm with the aim of communication and exchange across disciplines for better policy outcomes (Head & Walter, 2015). Nonetheless, within the literature, while there is considerable discussion about exchange between political science and social sciences and about methodology for social justice research, there emerged no reference to the relevance of human rights to policy analysis of equity.

In summary, in the substantive grounded theory, government and RTO policy-makers, teachers and trainers were seeking but not finding ways to better understand equity and what it means. In Australia, there are moves for policy analyses beyond traditional political science to a more plural

and pluralistic focus, across disciplines and across government, private and community sectors. Nonetheless, the broadening debate on social justice matters such as equity does not appear to be including the necessity of understanding human rights. I next coalesce the foregoing discussion to situate the core category of “absence of policy insight” within a move towards a formal theory.

### **6.3.3 The Core Category of “Absence of Policy Insight”: Towards a Formal Theory**

In summary of the literature comparison with the substantive grounded theory, the “absence of policy insight” contributes empirical evidence to a potential formal theory in the following ways.

With regard to productivity:

- the productivity/equity nexus in skills policy is “perverse” in the substantive grounded theory and “incompatible” with new public management in the literature. This has given rise to vocabulary of governance technology and the neo-social where the public value of equity is subsumed by policy focused on economic growth and where equity is re-articulated without reference to human rights law.

With regard to equity as human rights:

- equity as human rights can be argued to be a public value to inform educational and productivity positions and give balanced weight to each;
- valuing fairness and inclusion may contribute to a positive policy culture within which viable realities can be created for learners experiencing disadvantage but also for conscientious policy-makers and for educators;
- there are choices in how to balance productivity and educational outcomes as evidenced by research in skills policy and practice in other countries;
- policy analysis which is traditionally neglected as a paradigm and especially vexed in Australian states is a fundamental key to embedding equity strategy in skills policy. Policy analysis may be opening up to more plural and pluralistic issues although there continues to be absence of insight with regard to the matter of human rights;
- fragmentation of government process gives rise to ideas of public administration paradigms, such as public value, that are alternatives to new public management.

The substantive grounded theory is extended and transcended by the research literature. However, the substantive grounded theory challenges the academic literature for its absence of policy insight into equity as a matter of human rights. In this way, the substantive grounded theory continues to be a matter of the clash between the industry-dominated productivity objective and of equity.

## 6.4 Core Category: Absence of Learner Disposition

“They – the learners – are all different and they will all grow”

(Terry, trnr and Tony, pmkr2, Chapter 5)

With evidence inducted across macro, meso and micro levels of inquiry, this study seeks alternatives to traditional social categorisation and barriers analysis in VET. As the intellectual puzzle is concerned with how to embed equity, this study was concerned with learners’ voices as they may relate to organisational contexts.

This section is the literature comparison with empirical evidence of learner disposition (Figure 5.1). Relevant concepts are: learner disposition; *habitus* as traditions and dilemmas; and situating the learner, not the voice, each of which I discuss in the following sections.

### 6.4.1 Learner Disposition

“I really regret the past – it was just too easy not to go [to VET]”

(Gerry, lnrr)

Gerry’s statement above represents the importance of considering learner disposition as processual. The substantive grounded theory extends discussion about learner disposition in academic literature in two ways. First, learner disposition in the substantive grounded theory comprises:

- temporal and processual representation of categories of silent voices which include accommodating terror; loving to learn; being amazed; waiting to see (Figure 5.4);
- traditions and dilemmas as set out in the substantive grounded theory (5.3.5).

In addition, the voice of the learner is heard, not silent, through the learner but also through government and RTO policy-makers, providers, teachers and trainers. I compared the literature and the learner disposition with reference to the next points of discussion: definition and policy implementation; and learners as process.

#### 6.4.1.1 Definition and Policy Implementation

In Australia, the NPASR (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b) and standards for VET regulation (Australian Government, 2012) engage concepts of social categorisation and barriers analysis as ways of understanding learners experiencing disadvantage but each of these processes are argued to lack necessary understanding of learners’ subjective experience (2.8). Engaging with learner disposition is a classroom practice and has potential to inform policy but Australian public administration appears not to be engaging with the concept (Farrington et al., 2012).

Contextually, there are strong arguments for reconsideration in Australian policy of how to address disadvantage through subjective experience of learners (Baird, 2015; Beddie, 2015; Broek & Hake, 2012; Figgis et al., 2007). Baird (2015) argued that better understanding of people can contribute to better policy-making. Beddie suggested that the continuing equity, and inequality, gap which has not responded to demographic or government policies, may more effectively be addressed through learner disposition and *habitus*, or “deep-seated social and cultural structures” (p. 38). Broek and Haek (2012), Figgis et al. (2007) and Field (2012) do qualitatively investigate learner disposition, or learner subjective experience, but each in different ways. A contribution of this research is to situate interpretation of learner disposition within broader policy frameworks. I aim for a “new structure of feeling” (Sellar & Gale, 2011, p. 115) for learners and equity in skills policy in the apparent absence of ways to explore disposition of learners experiencing disadvantage for policy and in a human rights context

In the next sub-section, I discuss the learners as process which underpins the theory of learner disposition.

#### ***6.4.1.2 Learners as Process Within Habitus of Traditions and Dilemmas***

The substantive grounded theory proposed a subjective, processual interpretation of learner disposition as a way of integrating the concept into policy (Figure 5.4) and analysed evidence of *habitus* in terms of traditions and dilemmas of Tasmania. The categories comprising accommodating terror, living to learn, being amazed, and waiting to see showed a marked processual character to learner disposition (Figure 5.4). Literature of the distinguished researchers in Tasmania, Australia and internationally in this study (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Charmaz, 2008; S. Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007; Figgis et al., 2007) support the substantive grounded theory that people experiencing disadvantage will go through a transitional, liminal, mosaic-like process and that their experiences are likely to show personal growth.

The necessity to interpret learners in terms of process, and of transition, is taken up by J. Field (2012, p. 5). J. Field (2012) drew attention to the postmodern conundrum where there is a normative orientation to change but much less certainty about whether the education system delivers skills for dealing with change. The substantive grounded theory identified policy failure to find “the switch” (Glenn (pmkr1), Riley (pmkr1), Tony (pmkr2), Gray (trnr)) and to change the dead-end nature of learners’ experiences. The evidence corroborated pervasive theorising in the substantive grounded theory that the education system was not engaging with change education because there was a culture of low expectations and an assumption that learners would not grow. There was absence of policy about learner disposition and learners’ progress was truncated as they were left “waiting to



see” about their future. The *habitus* and traditions and dilemmas of learners gave context to the subjective learner identity which I next discuss.

## 6.4.2 Habitus as Traditions and Dilemmas

“You have to understand, Val, we are the welfare people; I am a welfare child.” (Naomi, Irnr)

Naomi’s plea (5.4.2) above, was one way of looking at aspects of *habitus* for learners. Naomi was describing welfare as a symbol of her personal *habitus*, her Tasmanian tradition and her dilemma, and she was alluding to her interaction with it. I saw Naomi as interpreting her own Tasmanian *habitus* and her life decisions. Naomi is driven by her own responses to that interpretation of being a welfare child which I interpreted as being ashamed. While as researchers we may remind ourselves extensively not to make assumptions about people from their circumstances, Naomi is telling us that she is interpreting and interacting herself with her own traditions and dilemmas. The implication for policy positions is that it is learners’ responses to interview questions that matter as well as opportunity for them to be expansive to the interviewer about their worldview.

Understanding *habitus* helped to make visible the learners’ reality but I sought to link the concept also to policy analysis. J. Field (2012) writes of the importance of understanding *habitus as* social milieu as a way of understanding the subjective learner identity. Lingard et al. (2014) suggest that the “neo-social” phenomenon limits space for *habitus* analysis such that we do not understand social and cultural influences on why people learn in different ways (p. 725). In this study, traditions and dilemmas was transposed from political science to represent learners’ *habitus* primarily to invoke language that would fit and work for policy-makers. As political scientists/organisational theorists, Bevir and Rhodes’s (2003) interpretive methodology is undertaken through beliefs, traditions and dilemmas. Bevir and Rhodes (2003) reject positivist methodology to argue we must explore construction of peoples’ world and that means understanding how they are influenced by their location, their interests and, most importantly, what are the norms that surround them (Bevir et al., 2003, p. 7). Bevir et al. (2003) argue that we cannot presume to understand people based on social facts but must relate them to “... other beliefs, traditions and dilemmas” (p. 7).

In the substantive grounded theory, traditions and dilemmas are significant sensitising concepts from macro, meso and micro theorising. There were many calls from participants for equity policy to be cognisant of Tasmanian nuance (Chapter 5). RTO and government policy-makers emphasised that learners’ dispositions had to be understood with reference to the Tasmanian historical, social and economic environment. I requote Billy (pmkr1) who said that Tasmania is “.... haunted by history” (5.6.2) and traditions are creating contemporary dilemmas for skills development.

In summary, the study sought to bring together empirical evidence comprising the learners' inclination to learn and to locate it within the broad historical and social environment surrounding them. In the next section I explore how to understand the learner in policy and situate the learner as process in policy.

### **6.4.3 Situating the Learner, Not the Voice**

The substantive grounded theory is not generally consistent with the literature that seeks to understand the learner through the lens of learner voice (Moretti, Howard, & Barnett, 2013; NVEAC, 2011). The inconsistency is that my primary framework for understanding and respecting the learner is through human rights. Learner voice is a matter of personal agency and agency can be underpinned and supported by human rights (Figure 2.1). The category of "absence of learner disposition" theorised the failure of the system to recognise the subjective identity, the learner disposition, and the idea of equity as a matter of human rights. In addition, how the learner was understood in policy referred to how policy analysis is undertaken, especially with regard to seeing policy analysis through new perspectives of social science methodology (Dunn, 2012).

Synergistiq (2013) approached the learner through the learner voice as a strategy and as a "tool" to be "integrated in education provision" (p. 10). Moretti, Howard and Barnett (2013) noted the learners' lesser opportunity for representation and advocacy in VET, especially those with physical disability, as compared to learners in other areas of education, especially universities. The substantive grounded theory had a different approach to either Synergistiq or Moretti et al by attempting to situate subject identity, and learner disposition, within broader policy frameworks. Further, this study was different from others because I caution legislative change for the specific purpose of invoking learner voice – it may be unnecessary if the synthesis of human rights and responsibilities (Figure 2.1) is integrated into governance, administration and to policy analysis. Synergistiq (2013, p. 26) and Moretti et al. (2013) argued for the learner voice to be embedded into the VET system, to contribute to governance and for legislation to give effect to this position.

Bragg (2007) argued that the notion of student voice is contested and viewed with suspicion as it is perceived as morphing from its original emancipatory and transformative purpose to the shape of a key performance indicator to suit management objectives. The notion of student voice "... causes disquiet, even concerns that it might be cynical and manipulative, intentionally or not masking the 'real' interests of those in power" (Bragg, 2007, p. 344). Angus, Golding and Foley (2013) espoused that, in contemporary public administration paradigms, insight and feedback about learner voice are "almost laughable" (p. 566). Angus et al. (2013) argued that "learner voice" with regard to learners

experiencing disadvantage is undertaken in ways that imply “... that ‘learner voice’ is largely a proxy for the concept of student equity” and for inclusion (Angus et al., 2013, p. 560). Angus et al. (2013) posited that the NVEAC position on learner voice is “thin”; it does not entail genuine engagement that will promote reform in education, or in society (p. 562). While valuing literature that argued for greater respect for and contribution from learners into policy settings, the substantive grounded theory found more is needed to understand how to effectively engage with learner voice. This study is less concerned with possible motives of management with regard to learner voice and more concerned with what fits and works; I have shown in Chapter 5 that what “fits and works” engages a change in symbols and languages in VET to which learners experiencing disadvantage can interact. In this study, the key issue is not with learner voice but with how evidence is collected, analysed and transferred to policy.

This study challenges the literature and argues that the first steps for legislative change are best taken through improved methodology and policy analysis. In addition, legislative change to entrench learner voice should not occur without first incorporating human rights and all that that entails for learner voice. It is not the individual learner, nor the learner voice, which is in the centre but the abstract theory of the learner. I next coalesce foregoing analysis to propose the core category of “absence of learner disposition” as a step towards a formal theory.

## **6.5 The Core Category of Absence of Learner Disposition: Towards a Formal Theory**

The essence of the category of “absence of learner disposition” lies in human rights. A human rights report card referencing the theory of learner disposition and the “Synthesis of human rights and responsibilities in the skills sector” (Figure 2.1) (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1960) generally raises several issues including: respect for the learner; conducting and monitoring research which constantly informs policy-makers and educators about the nature of barriers to learning; ensuring all learners know that they have human rights in the learning environment.

Further, the substantive grounded theory contributes to a “theoretical rendering” (Charmaz, 2014) that may go towards a formal theory in the following ways:

- macro, meso and micro levels of theorising gave rise to processual perspectives of learner disposition which could be situated in broader policy concepts. These could allow for analysis that drilled down to highlight consequences of policy positions and to suggest strategies for

change. The concept of learner voice is not transformative as expected and in any event, is difficult to make fit and work in policy;

- taking a methodological approach to policy analysis and engaging a human rights perspective may affect perceived legislative requirements for giving voice to learners experiencing disadvantage to a matter of institutional process;
- these are issues of fit of equity within paradigms of public administration and related policy analysis that is consistent with a humanist approach to equity.

I next discuss the final core category of the substantive grounded theory: “teaching dilemma”.

## 6.6 Core Category: Teaching Dilemma

“We don’t do either really – not productivity or social inclusion.” (Terry, trnr)

The Employers’ Use and Views of the VET System Survey (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2015b) found that the NPASR (COAG, 2012) (Chapter 2) is effective for formulating and implementing skills reform from the perspective of industry. However, the equity gap continues (NVEAC, 2011). The core category of “teaching dilemma” emerges from these two competing positions. Terry’s comment above that neither objectives of productivity nor social inclusion are being achieved is indicative of positions in the substantive grounded theory as well as in the literature (NVEAC, 2011). “Teaching dilemma” is a combination of many codes, culminating in a process of normalising through teaching and abnormalising through policy.

### 6.6.1 Normalising by Teaching, Abnormalising by Policy

“I didn’t see education as getting a job. I had to get money. Education was scary. I just thought I wasn’t good enough.” (Bay, lnrr)

“Teaching dilemma” was a category that looked back to former theorising as well as forward to new ideas. “Teaching dilemma” was evidence in the perverseness of the productivity and equity objectives; of the absence of learner disposition in policy; of the neo-social and governance technology (Lingard et al., 2014; Savage, 2013) approaches that allowed datafication to dehumanise the learner experiencing disadvantage. Nonetheless, I returned to the evidence to reflect on learner interviews and Bay’s comment above showed that it was important to add to the evidence in terms of the normalising and abnormalising features of skills policy. This was less to reinforce the category and more to explore its key aspects.

Outcomes and participation for learners experiencing disadvantage are measured in terms of productivity goals (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b) but participants showed that other matters are important. For example, learners who were parents were passing on intergenerational benefits. Bay's comment above represents several aspects of the learner disposition that to which learners, teachers and trainers frequently referred. Bay's tradition had given her a view of education as unhelpful in her life and this posed a dilemma for the present and future. She had children; she needed money; she was frightened; she had no faith in her ability. For learners such as Bay, a significant limit to this approach is that intergenerational benefits for learners experiencing disadvantage are not usually entered the equation (Beddie, 2015). Effectively, Bay was saying that she felt that she was different from other people. Bay was ripe for being normalised through teaching. Bay was ripe also for abnormalising through policy which set her on a pathway to develop skills to meet industry demand when first she had a lot of learning to do to develop capability. She was arguably being set up to fail *unless* she was supported through change and transition. The corollary was that other parents, Kelly and Gerry, who had overcome earlier barriers and were progressing in skills development, referred to the positive role modelling that they were providing for other members of their family, often children who were adults.

In the literature, key elements of this discussion are the role of VET; normalising and transitions, and self-capitalisation. I discuss each in turn.

### **6.6.2 The Role of VET**

VET is seen as engaging with two cultures (2.6.3.1) (Angus et al., 2013; Ryan, 2011) and there is a schism between the roles of provision of skills to industry and community and individual rights to more generalised education. The schism symbolises the push and pull between categories of normalising and abnormalising for learners experiencing disadvantage. VET is argued to have an unrealistic (Beddie, 2015; Karmel, 2010b) democratising role (Lamb, Jackson, & Walstab, 2015), a role in social inclusion as agent for change for people experiencing disadvantage together with a role to provide skills for present industry demand.

VET in Australia and internationally has a "much more complex relationship with society than other educational sectors" (Karmel, 2010b, p. 234). Of interest to this study was that no research recognised the need for the building blocks for a human rights structure advocated by the AHRC (2015a) in VET. Indeed, all appear to accept participation as a substitute for fairness and inclusion in equity. The push and pull exemplified in the two cultures of VET needed to be addressed for its ramifications for learners experiencing disadvantage. I addressed these through the lens of skilling as

a normalising process which expects learners to transition and through the concept of self-capitalisation. I address these matters in the following discussion.

### 6.6.3 Normalising and Transitions

The empirical material that drove the category of normalising reflected tension around pressure to make learners be like everybody else (5.5.1). There was normalising through teaching for making learners work-ready. There was also normalising where the goal was to ensure learners' social compliance with a perceived "middle class" box (5.5.1). This invoked literature about change and transition (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Beddie, 2015; J. Field, 2012; Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1972). The comparisons needed in this study were those related to subjective learner identity and learner disposition needing more than quantitative inquiry to theorise propositions for change for learners experiencing disadvantage.

In the literature, the issue of transition is significant but there are differing perspectives. Beddie's (2015, p. 8) research raises the first question of: normalising for what? If learners experiencing disadvantage are most likely to be undertaking Certificates I or II, then Beddie (2015) argues that these are not skills for a job but "stepping stones" (p. 8) to higher-level certificates. There should be progression if learners do not end up in precarious work situations. J. Field (2012) approaches transition as a matter of normalisation. He points out that significant research is undertaken about transitions in educational systems but its methodological emphasis is on the quantitative (Field, 2012). He also emphasises that good policy and practice recognises transitions and a "liminal identity" (Field, 2012, p. 5) of the learner. Effective processes will understand the learner disposition and support the learner to move into and then to continue within the educational system.

Ecclestone and Godley (2014) and Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) propose in different ways that policy-makers should change how transition is viewed. Like J. Field, Ecclestone and Godley (2014) argue that existing policy wrongly conceives of transition as linear and uni-directional and targeted at those who "fail" to comply with normative expectations. However, Ecclestone and Goodley (2014) argue that policy-makers pathologise vulnerability. This position relegates the learner to a position of being "vulnerable and disengaged" (Ecclestone, 2010). Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) see differently to explicate "normalising" as the "long arm of the job" (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013, p. 270) a phenomenon where training opportunities and the path to normalcy are skewed to those already trained – already normalised – and in the workforce while others have limited opportunity to make the transition. The corollary is whether and how a learner can become "normal" rests on policy

and practice that recognises that there is not just industry demand but also public demand for skills and that people will experience transitions and processes of change.

For the purposes of this study, UNESCO's (1972) position is notable in that transition among learners involves: the search for employment and the desire for learning. UNESCO and the publication *Learning to be* (UNESCO, 1972) is a common reference among researchers and often provides the final word. Work is often cast in policy as the greater imperative and yet: "... curiosity, the desire to understand, know or discover, remains one of the deepest drives in human nature" (UNESCO, 1972, p. xxviii). Beddie (2015) exemplifies this from a governance and public administration perspective in the 2015 "Outcomes of Education and Training 2011–2014". Beddie (2015) laments that the research priorities of previous years have been work/market driven and have lacked an education focus such as is exemplified in UNESCO.

The substantive grounded theory was entirely consistent with positions in the literature that connected transition and process with a system that aimed to normalise learners. Certainly the theorising in this study found UNESCO's curiosity and the desire to understand a significant part of learner disposition (5.4.2). The substantive grounded theory did not engage with Ecclestone and Goodley's (2014) concepts of pathologised vulnerability and whether this impinges on disengagement. However, the substantive grounded theory did argue against social categorisation (5.5.2.1) as a process that may compound problems of pathologised vulnerability. "Self-capitalisation" integrates with the foregoing section but its influence requires its own discussion, which I deal with next.

#### **6.6.4 Self-capitalisation**

An additional dimension to concepts of normalising was that of "self-capitalisation" (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013; J. Field, 2012; Lingard et al., 2014) which has become a "... normative orientation" (J. Field, 2012, p. 5); becoming normal, or changing, is increasingly left to individual motivation and a matter merely for policy implementation, not cultivation. Therein lay the dilemma for teachers and trainers in this study who were wrestling with obdurate policy goals that did not support the cultivation of learners' disposition to change and progress in their learning. This was a strong element of the substantive grounded theory where empirical evidence abounded that there is a schism between what teachers and trainers are doing in classrooms to cultivate skills development and what is happening at policy levels.

I next propose the core category of "teaching dilemma" as a step towards a potential formal theory.

## 6.7 The Core Category of “Teaching Dilemma”: Towards a Formal Theory

“Teaching dilemma” builds on the absence of policy insight into understanding the subjective experience of the learner. Furthermore, “teaching dilemma” generates additional abstract theory that the teachers and the trainers, the people at the coalface to enable the VET policy, have a “dilemma” in knowing how to meet policy objectives and to also effect learner outcomes. This is hindering better outcomes for individuals as well as for industry and goals of productivity

The “teaching dilemma” involved absence of insight into how to come to terms with the expectations of the role of VET. The push and pull of competing roles affects what is happening in the classroom. There emerged as an abnormalising environment when the learner identity was channelled into a work pathway and service to industry. Self-capitalisation, or absence of it, was a significant part of the process of abnormalising for learners experiencing disadvantage. The literature and the macro, meso and micro theorising of the substantive grounded theory recognised a “teaching dilemma” that made self-capitalisation a normative position for learners experiencing disadvantage.

In the next section, I take the three core categories to contribute to the springboard to the formal theory. This requires a direct examination of why equity is problematic in the substantive grounded theory and in the literature and I deal with this in the next sections.

## 6.8 Why is Equity Problematic: The Springboard

“I am delighted to have this conversation [about equity in skills development]; it is frustrating that it is so hard to have. Part of the ongoing debate [with a government funding agency] is that many of us [policy-makers] want to be able to influence policy in this area. Industry is not driving skills; so who is?” (Riley, pmkr2)

The substantive grounded theory emerged as “problematic equity” a term that was coined to represent coding around issues of frustration raised by Riley (pmkr2), above. In the spirit of conGT, the substantive grounded theory prompted incursions into additional literature and new interpretations of literature previously visited. This took me deeper into analysis as to why equity is problematic in this discussion.

To review with regard to “absence of policy insight”, I extended and transcended by: explicating equity as a matter of human rights (p. 197); through vocabulary such as *governance technology* and the *neosocial* to make visible contemporary redefinitions of equity (p. 197) ; through ideas of public-



value governance, generally and educationally (p. 200); through concepts in public administration of viable realities for conscientious policy-makers and teachers and trainers (p. 13); and exploration of my observations of insularity of public policy (p. 149). With regard to “absence of learner disposition”, I extended theory of learner disposition and transcended by proposing ways of administering traditions and dilemmas and by looking at learner disposition in processual and transitional ways (Figure 5.1). I challenged contemporary literature about how to address learner voice by proposing that situated interpretations of learner disposition, and a human rights legislative framework, are essential elements (p. 149). I transcended literature by theorising that the push and pull of policy and process – of normalising and abnormalising – lay at the heart of the process of a “teaching dilemma” (p. 181).

I also compared “absence of policy insight”, “absence of learner disposition” and “teaching dilemma” with the synthesis of human rights and responsibilities (Figure 2.1). This exercise highlights how problematic is the matter of equity in skills policy in Australia and in Tasmania. The report card and the empirical and theoretical evidence thus far show absence of a human rights culture and practice in VET equity governance and public administration. The report card highlights the lack of attention to centralising human rights in policy, to ensuring education of all participants about human rights and to maintaining data about potential as well as present learners (Figure 2.1).

The empirical and theoretical findings take steps towards a potential formal theory, and the complexities of modern public administration became the overlay. Throughout the whole of the study, I observed that the ubiquitous idea was the difficulty of administering complex issues such as equity within more plural and pluralistic systems than have been prevalent in the past. There are regular references in the literature to the need to connect with disparate stakeholders who are government, private and community and to conduct research in relational ways (Angus et al., 2013; Dunn, 2012; Rhodes, 2007; Stoker, 2006). I memo’ed constantly throughout the literature comparison to try to link core categories, categories, and their properties. A springboard (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to a potential formal theory began to emerge.

### **6.8.1 The Springboard from Substantive Grounded Theory towards Formal Theory**

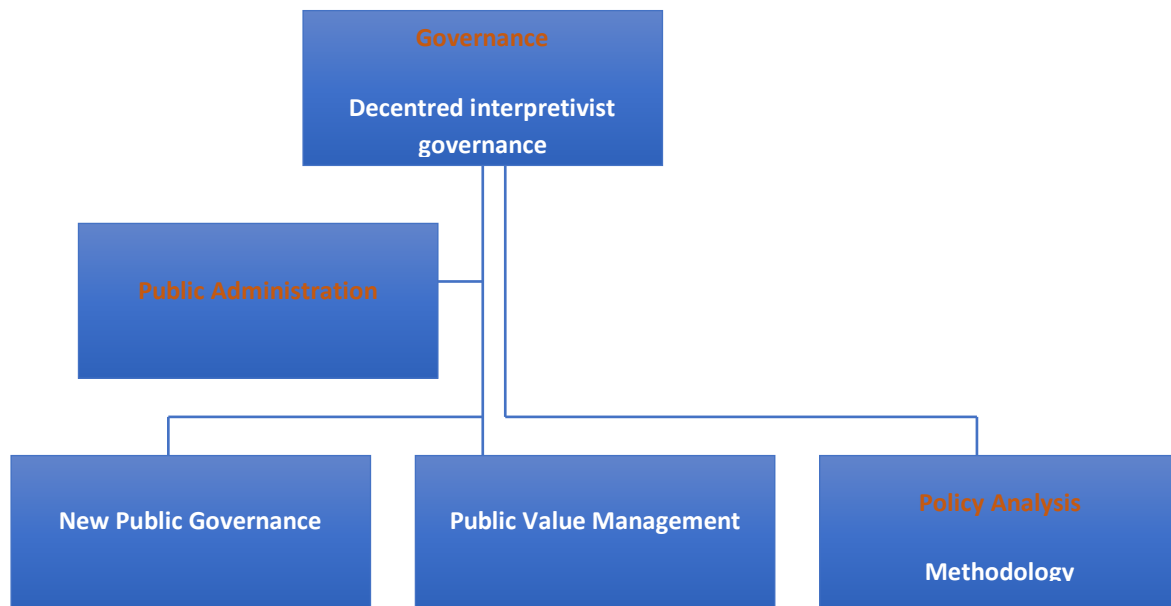
I theorised in the foregoing about the ways in which core categories move towards a formal theory. In sum, I theorised a number of points that surrounded the dilemmas in teaching. We must approach equity as a matter of governance principles that trickle down to affect the behaviour of policy-makers, RTOs, teachers and trainers and learners experiencing disadvantage. Equity is a public value

and engages human rights as a matter of fairness and inclusion. Policy that represents equity as human rights benefits learners and conscientious policy-makers and educators. Productivity and educational outcomes are well balanced in other countries. There are emerging new ways of doing equity policy analysis but human rights continue to be absent. The fragmentation of government is encouraging new ways of looking at public administration paradigms, including the idea of public value. One emerging, humanist, concept in policy is “learner disposition” which may better situate the learner in broader educational realms that focus on “learner voice. Teachers and trainers are caught in a dilemma of competing interests in policy and learner outcomes. The “teaching dilemma” is hindering better outcomes for individuals as well as for industry and goals of productivity.

To further contextualise theorising, I revisit Figgis et al (2007) together with Denzin (2014). In Australia, Figgis et al. (2007) captured national and international frustration in research about public policy settings and how they lack meaning for service delivery and “lived experience” of implementers of policy. Figgis et al. (2007) argued that although there are numerous equity strategies at national, state and territory and organisational levels, problematic equity continues. So, they argued for a re-balancing of industry and equity demands with a new way of planning that will involve better methodology for linking macro level goals (such as, for example, a knowledge-driven economy) with a keen sense of which policy will affect and touch the learners to whom the policy is addressed (Figgis et al., 2007). Seven years later, in late 2014, Denzin robustly pursued his similar, long-standing concern about public policy and methodology. Denzin (2014) referred to the “big divide” in qualitative academic communities to assert that deeper and different research is needed in equity and inequality. He argued that qualitative research must deal with its internal struggles and then assume a place at the policy tables. It is the role of researchers to take steps to force against the hegemony of the science discourse and to demonstrate rigorous qualitative research (Denzin, 2014). Denzin (2014) presents the matter of methodology as involving the politics of evidence where the term “evidence” is itself contested (1.17). Part of Denzin’s “rallying call” (41.06) is for increased research in social justice and equity. Figgis gives us the local experience and Denzin the broader global concerns about policy and equity: each influenced the theorising that led to a potential formal theory.

Consistent with conGT, the core categories are taken to new levels of abstract “theoretical rendering of a generic issue” (Charmaz, 2014). The theorising springboards from the substantive grounded theory which shows that governance, public administration and policy analysis should work in lockstep for change to be contemplated in skills policy and equity. This is the point at which the springboard moves from empirical evidence to the theory of an envisioned (Lather, 2013, p. 1)

perspective of equity in skills policy. The springboard begins to represent the “shoulds and oughts” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 510) that are the essence of social justice research. In Figure 6.2 below, I represent the springboard that emerged as: involving governance from the decentred interpretivist governance perspective; paradigms of public administration which are new public governance and public value; and policy analysis as methodology. I follow Figure 6.2 with a discussion of each.



**Figure 6.2: Substantive Grounded Theory Springboard**

Consistent with conGT (Charmaz, 2014), to move to more abstract theorising, I took three steps across disciplines. I set out the steps in to Figure 6.2 beginning with the top box. First, in consideration of *governance*, I drew extensively on the research of Rhodes and Bevir as authors of the “... most analysed scholarship in recent years” (Ball, 2008; Turnbull, 2011, p. 252) of politics, policy making and public administration proposing change to mainstream studies. The interpretivist research of Rhodes (e.g. 2007), Rhodes and Bevir (e.g. 2003) and of Bevir (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003, 2010) considers *decentred network interpretivist governance* theory (Rhodes, 1997, 2007). Second, in consideration of *public administration*, integrated with Rhodes and Bevir, I drew also on the research of Stoker (2006) who proposes *public-value* management as a lens to *new public governance*. In consideration of *policy analysis*, I returned to the interpretivism of Rhodes (1997, 2007, 2011) and drew on traditional and contemporary academic research including the constructivist grounded theory of Charmaz (2014). I next discuss “Alternative Equity” which brings together the abstract theorising which I propose moves towards a potential formal theory.

## 6.9 Towards a Formal Theory of Alternative Equity: Neo-equity and Embedded Equity

The potential formal theory emerged as *alternative equity* and is comprised of *neo-equity* and *embedded equity* or, “the inequitable world as it is ... and the equitable world it could be” (Pasque et al., 2012, p. 3) respectively. *Neo-equity* is the descriptive term that emerged from this study out of the substantive grounded theory and literature comparison (Branson, 2009; Lingard et al., 2014; Stoker, 2006). *Embedded equity* is a theory to understand and envision a new way of looking at equity as a matter of human rights. *Embedded equity* elevates the place of human rights law drawing on the Synthesis (figure 2.1). *Embedded equity* arises from understanding of the learner through learner disposition; empirical evidence and literature comparison that theorised about alternative public administration paradigms, especially public-value administration (Stoker, 2006). *Alternative equity* (Figure 6.3) is comprised of the two figures depicting *neo-equity* (Figure 6.3a) and *embedded equity* (Figure 6.3b).

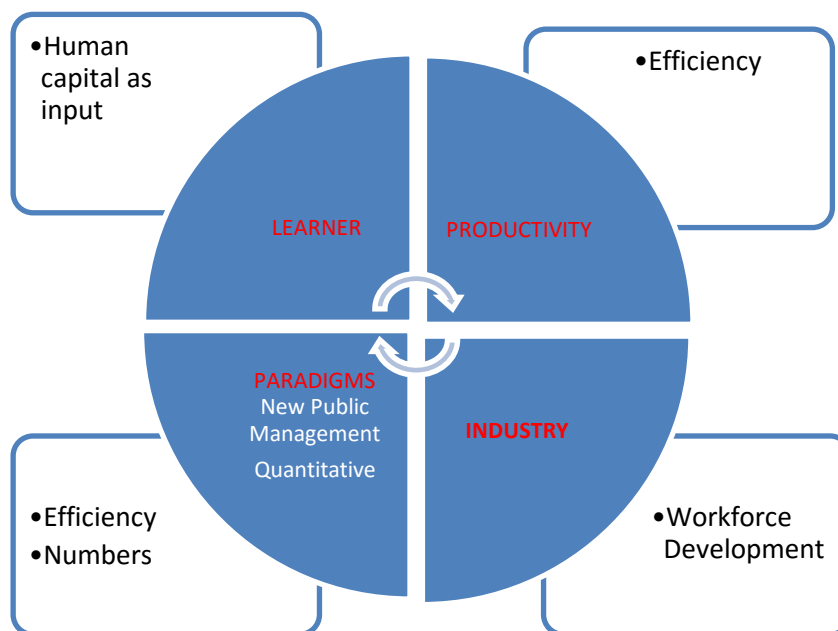


Figure 6.3a: Neo-Equity

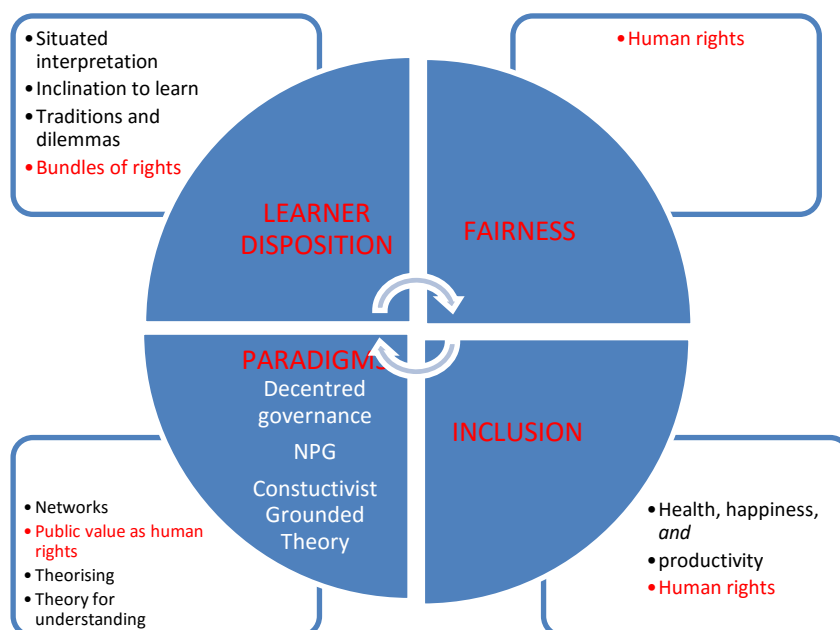


Figure 6.3b: Embedded Equity

Figure 6.3: Alternative Equity (comprising Figure 6.3a: Neo-Equity and Figure 6.3b: Embedded Equity)

## 6.9.1 Neo-equity

Neo-equity is the term I coined to represent the question, and response to: Why is equity problematic? (p. 218). It is a diagram of equity as represented in the literature comparisons with the substantive grounded theory showing absence of policy insight, absence of learner disposition and teaching dilemma with respect to governance, public administration and policy analysis (p. 183), Further, it is equity from the perspective of substantive grounded theory *interaction* from which negative processes flow to affect behaviour of key participants of government and RTO policy-makers, teachers and trainers and learners experiencing disadvantage (Figure 6.2). This is re-articulated equity as the neo-social (Lingard et al., 2014; Savage, 2013) without the symbols, or process, of a human rights framework. This is skills policy in which the concept of social justice and equity itself is re-articulated and undermined by over-reliance on traditional methodological approaches in policy analysis (Figgis et al., 2007; Lingard et al., 2014; G. Savage et al., 2013). It represents productivity objectives which commodify (Armstrong et al., 2016; Miller, 2010; Patrick, 2013; Valencia, 1997) the learner. This is equity in skills policy based on contemporary Australian policy (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b) of industry-dominated demand focused on the

goals of efficiency and attempting to function within what this research proposed is NPM public administration (2.6.2.1).

Neo-equity represents the context of policy, legislation and literature analysed in Chapter 2 and described as “problematic context” (p. 62). I discuss in the next section how equity might be differently represented, and embedded, in governance and public administration of skills development.

## 6.9.2 Embedded Equity

In the conGT spirit of imagining a different understanding of equity (Charmaz, 2014), I developed abstract theory of *embedded equity* (Figure 6.3b). Questions remain within existing research as to how to embed equity in skills policy despite attention at macro levels of inquiry in the literature (e.g. Beddie, 2015; Lamb; McVicar & Tabasso, 2016; National VET Equity Advisory Council, 2011).

The formal theory is the culmination of consideration of fairness and inclusion as matters of human rights (Figure 2.1) together with the springboard (Figure 6.2) elements of governance, public administration and methodology/policy analysis. *Embedded equity* represents three concepts:

- human rights as *fairness* and *inclusion* with a definition involving health, happiness and productivity (2.5);
- learner experiencing disadvantage with reference to: *learner disposition* involving inclination to learn (2.7.1.2) theorised from empirical evidence, together with traditions and dilemmas; and the learners’ bundle of rights (Figure 2.1).
- paradigms to integrate *decentred network governance* (Bevir, 2012; Rhodes, 2007) and *constructivist grounded theory* to promote theorising and understanding as an appropriate analytic framework within the areas of public policy formulation and implementation relevant to this study.

I propose that the political science and organisation theory of Rhodes (1997; 2007) and the methodology of Charmaz (2014) are compatible philosophically, methodologically and with regard to methods. I propose a public administration paradigm/framework of new public governance and public value with methodology of conGT that may cast light on the intellectual puzzle of this study.

I discuss these three concepts in the following sections as: human rights: fairness and inclusion; learner experiencing disadvantage; decentred governance with constructivist grounded theory insights: Rhodes and Charmaz.

### 6.9.3 Human Rights: Fairness and Inclusion

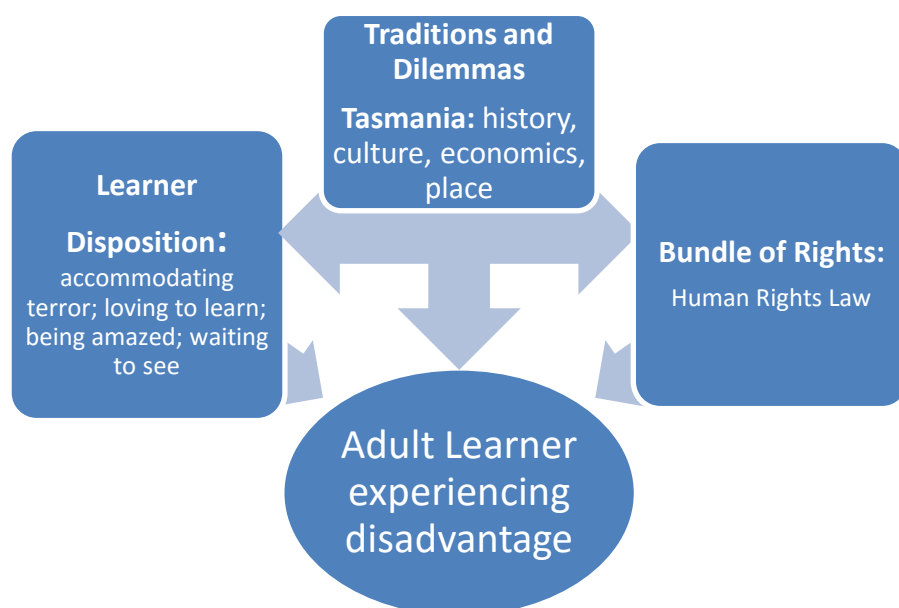
*Embedded equity* draws on the discussion of human rights as fairness and inclusion, as discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 227). To recap, in this study it is contended that as fairness and inclusion form the definition of equity (S. Field et al., 2007a; Ministerial Council on Education, 2008), equity is a matter of human rights. Fairness is an issue of anti-discrimination law (Office of Anti-Discrimination Commission, n.d.); inclusion is primarily a policy position in Australia although the UNESCO Convention (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1960) does impinge. Inclusion involves health and happiness and productivity (Adams, 2009). This is the frame for how to think about the learner experiencing disadvantage.

### 6.9.4 Learner Experiencing Disadvantage

Figure 6.3b attempts to represent the learner from an “uncommodified” perspective and differently from *neo-equity* (Figure 6.3a). Figure 6.3, depicting disposition, traditions and dilemmas and the learners’ bundle of rights, is one device to show how understanding the learner may advance ways to embed equity into skills policy. I theorised that learner disposition is one way of approaching the learner with respect for their individual learning identity. I interpreted learner disposition as: accommodating terror; loving to learn; being amazed; and waiting to see (Figure 5.1). Further, the formal theory *situates* this *interpretation* of the learner experiencing disadvantage with reference to concepts of: learner disposition (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013; J. Field, 2012); the traditions and dilemmas (Rhodes, 2007) of Tasmania; and human rights (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). Well after this theory was formulated, Beddie (2015) argued similarly that in the persistence of the equity gap in VET (Beddie, 2015; Buddelmeyer & Polidano, 2016; McVicar & Tabasso, 2016; National VET Equity Advisory Council, 2011), it may be that deeper issues of traditions and dilemmas and the impact of these on disposition may be one better way to begin to understand what is required for VET equity reform (p. 9).

Figure 6.3b of *embedded equity* situates interpretation of the learner experiencing disadvantage from two perspectives which I suggest may cast light on Beddie’s (2015) research. First, learner disposition is inducted and interpreted as an internalisation (Bourdieu, 2010) of traditions and dilemmas with which learners interact. Second, the learner is interpreted and situated with reference to local reasoning within broader realms of national policy in the manner that Bevir (2010) and Turnbull (2011) argue is a democratising process. This is consistent with the theorising of this study that equity is a matter of human rights involving respect for the learner experiencing

disadvantage (Chapter 2). Figure 6.4 aims to contribute to understanding the learner experiencing disadvantage in ways that will contribute to policy. Figure 6.4 is set out below.



**Figure 6.4: Situating the Learner Experiencing Disadvantage:  
Disposition; Traditions and Dilemmas, Bundle of Rights**

An important characteristic of this concept is that learners are located within their local geographic and policy environment (Bevir, 2010; Turnbull, 2011). Their subjective learner identity rests on the symbols and language (Charmaz, 2014) of that environment and the learners' interaction with them. This study is committed to the Denzin and Lincoln (2008) position that inquiry is credible when it is anchored in the languages and symbols of the local situation. The next question is what might be the nature of the governance framework within which the learner disposition may be situated.

### **6.9.5 Decentred Governance with Constructivist Grounded Theory Insights: Rhodes and Charmaz**

In the decentred governance model, Rhodes and Bevir (Bevir, 2011; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003) argue for interpretivist methodology which has ethnographic origins and this strikes a chord with the substantive grounded theory which emerged through interpretivist/conGT. I explored whether there are differences and similarities between Rhodes's (1997, 2007) foundational research on governance and Charmaz's (2014) methodology research that are relevant to the substantive grounded theory. I focused on Rhodes's *Everyday Life in British Government* (2011) for its comprehensive overview of Rhodes's methodology and methods together with Charmaz's *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2014) as the most comprehensive collation of emerging grounded theory. At Appendix L, I



provide a copy of an actualising memo which gives detail of how I analysed the consistencies of philosophy and methodology of Rhodes and Charmaz.

I interpreted the differences between interpretivism (or “story-telling”, as he terms it) as expounded by Rhodes and the conGT of Charmaz as likely to be, if not semantic, then at least manageable in projecting new ideas for public administration and public policy. Profound similarities of the two researchers’ theories are evident in their worldviews, the way they apply methods to represent and legitimate their theory and frequently the language they use to describe their positions.

This analysis finds that on the face of it Rhodes and Charmaz are alike in worldviews and their subsequent methodology and methods appear to coincide. The disciplines of each may explain the greater preoccupation of Rhodes with the nature of institutions and the focus of Charmaz on the potential of grounded theory to explore social justice issues and where institutions figure in these. Nonetheless, this study does find that decentred governance theory and conGT can serve this study together to respond to the intellectual puzzle as to how to embed equity in skills policy. In the following sections, I set out the next steps of what may comprise an alternative response to contemporary skills policy and equity for learners experiencing disadvantage.

## **6.10 Response to the Intellectual Puzzle and Research Questions: Embedded Equity**

I set out below: answers of how substantive grounded theory and the abstraction towards a formal theory respond to the intellectual puzzle and research questions; final observations on the intellectual puzzle.

### ***Intellectual puzzle:***

How might equity be embedded in skills policy?

### ***Answer:***

By grounding equity in human rights and by situating interpretation of the learner through better understanding of learner disposition and traditions and dilemmas. By promoting social inclusion as health and happiness as well as productivity; by undertaking policy analysis within frameworks of public administration paradigms of NPM and NPG; by promoting public value and applying methodology, such as conGT, that aims to understand subjective and ambiguous realities (Figure 6.3b).

### Research Questions:

1. How is equity defined and implemented in skills policy?

With definitions that re-articulate equity without a framework of human rights to implement processes to meet dominant industry demand for skills (Figure 6.3a, Neo-Equity);

2. How might learner disposition inform equity objectives in skills policy?

By inducting a processual interpretation of the adult learner experiencing disadvantage that can be situated within broader social and organisational realities (Figures 6.1 and 6.2).

What should be the key features of governance of equity in skills development?

Embedded equity as theorised in Figure 6.3a: an integration of rights, respect for learners and public value governance, public administration and policy analysis.

## 6.11 Final Observations on the Intellectual Puzzle

I have undertaken a study that is constructivist (Charmaz, 2014) to address the intellectual puzzle. Together with the people I have interviewed, I have developed theory grounded in evidence, and subject to context, that situates individual learners within broader realms of VET activity. The theorising reflects the philosophy of multiple truths through “problematic” and “alternative” equity leaving open multiple realities. I have interpreted within a social, historical framework. I theorise that the position that there is evidence to show that a human rights approach can be efficacious to address the equity gap. The equity gap continues in Australia despite the achievements of VET in the past decade, despite equity purported as a necessary part of policy, despite constant resources poured into policy formulation and into equity programs in education. The theorising in this study reflects the frustration of the Australian Human Rights Commission (2015a) that the Attorney-General’s Department (2010) has not included VET in the *Human Rights Framework* for policy and resource focus for human rights education in VET (and the public sector generally).

Guy and McCandless (2012) say it best:

Administration cannot exist without some philosophical force guiding it, and the realization of equity is not possible without a clear understanding of what it is (Guy & McCandless, 2012, p. 29).

Philosophy lies in governance of equity but why does it matter? The UNDP and UNESCO (UNESCO, 2009; United Nations Development Program, 2015; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009), through commissioned reports, advocate a human development

approach to skills governance especially for developing countries but also with messages for developed countries who are signatories to the Dakar Framework (UNESCO, 2000) and from whom they collect data (including Australia). UNESCO (2009) urges all countries to “get serious about equity” (p. 77). UNESCO points out that this is a matter of governance; equality and equity are matters of governance (p. 1). Furthermore, the United Nations (1948, p. 1) and International Labour Organization (ILO) promote the principles that there is no trade-off between economic growth, that equity will drive growth and that skills development is integral to future prosperity for all. ILO has created a new “Studies on Growth with Equity Institute” (International Labour Organization, 2016a). ILO forecasts declining economic growth and especially declining employment for vulnerable people and calls for strengthened policy positions to skills people experiencing disadvantage and put them into work (International Labour Organization, 2016b). North, Acemoglu, Fukuyama and Rodrik (2008), commissioned by the World Bank, propose that governance put simply is about changing the rules of the game.

In Australia, changing the rules of the game means drawing on the synthesis of human rights (Figure 2.1) and empirical evidence, so that a human rights approach in equity requires compliance in terms such as: all key actors in the skills sector will discover how to talk about equity through human rights education; existing and potential learners will know their rights and how to advocate for them; learners will be respected and will know that they have a right to respect; there will be rigorous policy to situate interpretation of the learner in broad policy arenas; segregation of learners experiencing disadvantage will be unusual and always subject to a reasonable adjustment test; all potential and existing learners, not just those who apply for VET education or those above Certificate III, will be the subject of policy and strategy to engage them in lifelong learning and skills development. More topically in 2016, government and private policy-makers, RTO policy-makers and teachers and trainers will know what to measure with regard to equity; reports such as those of the TVA (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2016b) and the VET FEE-HELP (NCVER, 2015a) will not be revelations of what is not known about learners experiencing disadvantage. All policy and process will reference equity as fairness and inclusion as a matter of human rights.

If policy positions choose to cite UNESCO, as Tasmania does (Skills Tasmania, 2009), then it follows that policy formulation and implementation should be evaluated against the provisions of the Convention. It will be a challenge to sit equity alongside competition policy and a marketised approach to VET. Australia does not have a human rights charter but there may be some potential opportunity for change in the shift in Australian governance of human rights relevant to the NPASR (COAG 2012b) which may affect the *Tasmanian Equity Policy and Action Plan* (Skills Tasmania, 2009).

The *Human Rights Framework* (Attorney-General's Department, 2010) is a contribution to human rights governance together with the recent establishment of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (House of Representatives, 2013). A key function of the Joint Committee is to scrutinise bills and legislation with reference to a *Statement of Compatibility* (Attorney-General's Department, 2016) for consistency with United Nations human rights treaties to which Australia is party and to respond to government requests to undertake broader human rights enquiries. Further, in competition policy, the Australian Government (2015) has accepted recommendations of the Harper Review (Harper, Anderson, McCluskey, & O'Bryan, 2015) and, while upholding the objective of neutrality for government VET providers, has allowed the flexibility of a public interest test with regard to VET. The public interest test may offer opportunity for governance and policy focus simply stated in the ILO (Axmann, Rhoades, Nordstrum, La Rue, & Byusa, 2015) which responds to the contemporary imperative for improved teacher training as well as "... systems that are effective, efficient, equitable and innovative, and furthermore, that are aligned to national and local objectives to improve productivity, employment and social inclusion" (p. 5). Symbolically, the public interest may suggest also that the industry-dominated objectives of productivity has its limits – especially in a small island State - and that skills policy might have more education focus.

Can human rights approach really have efficacy? I propose that a human rights approach, at its minimum, fills the gap of the "... relative absence of empirical investigation of either the normative propositions of public value or its efficacy as framework for understanding public management" (Bryson et al., 2014, p. 452). Further, the OECD (2015b) supports the notion that making equity a policy objective is making material difference in contributing for a more secure future for all. The AHRC (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2006) proposed to the Tasmanian Law Reform Institute (TLRI) that the efficacy of a human rights framework was that it created a dialogue between the courts, the executive and the legislature about human rights protection. Robertson draws attention to the emerging evidence of the success of the state charters in the ACT (*Human Rights Act 2004*) and Victoria (*Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*) in making measurable contribution to good government.

A human rights approach in this study placed obligations on policy-makers (Figure 2.1) and RTOs and it provided learners with a bundle of rights (Figure 6.3). Based on the academic literature, most notably that of Rhodes (2007), of Rhodes with his frequent co-author Bevir (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010), Stoker and Taylor-Gooby (2013), Bryson (2014), Osborne (2010), Lingard (2014), Savage (2013), Bragg (2007), Denzin (2014), Charmaz (2014), and the AHRC (2012), I summarise that respect of the rights of the learner experiencing disadvantage requires governance of equity (Lingard et al., 2014) that:

- governs in a human rights framework and rejects untested social categorisation of learners and segregation of learners (2.8);
- acknowledges the reality of transitioning of decentred network model of governance (2.8);
- incorporates concepts of learner disposition and traditions and dilemmas (2.8);
- engages the politics of evidence through rigorous qualitative constructivist methodology (Chapter 6);
- investigates macro, meso and micro levels of theorising and situates interpretation of learners experiencing disadvantage in organisational frameworks (Chapter 5).

## 6.12 Chapter Summary

In the three sections of this chapter, I developed the theory of *problematic equity* grounded in the *substantive grounded theory* (Figure 5.1). I compared literature with the theory (Figures 5.1 and 6.1) to highlight absence of human rights culture and practice in VET equity governance and public administration. I presented new layers of abstract analysis towards a formal theory of *alternative equity* (Figure 6.3) to drive understanding of how contemporary policy has characteristics of *neo-equity* (Figure 6.3a). I undertook further theoretical analysis to propose a public administration model of *embedded equity* (Figure 6.3b) founded on human rights defined as fairness and inclusion. *Embedded equity* addressed directly the intellectual puzzle of how might equity be embedded in skills policy by proposing consideration of learner disposition, human rights and paradigms of public administration.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion and Final Observations

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## 7.1 Introduction

The rule of law should be a pillar of our society. Human rights law and culture should be intrinsic to policy and to social justice research. However, in Australia, we have seen a human rights “recession” in policy over the past 15 years (AHRC, 2015a; Triggs, 2016) and we see human rights, equity and social justice constrained by evidence-based method in academic and education research (Charmaz, 2014; Clarke, 2005; Denzin, 2014; Lingard & Gale, 2010; Tobin & Kincheloe, 2006; Wiseman, 2010). The world and the United Nations know of the human rights recession through the conspicuous plights of our Indigenous people and the people who lawfully seek asylum here but are held indefinitely in off-shore detention. What is less visible in the human rights recession is the Australian Government rejection in 2008 of a human rights charter despite strong community support for it and despite the prevalence of a charter or similar in all the common-law world. What is much less understood in the human rights recession is the potential for a declining culture of respect for the rights of all Australians consistent with international conventions to which Australia is signatory. Enter vocational education and training.

This study theorises that vocational education and training (VET) is a casualty of the human rights recession in Australia. This is for numerous reasons. The governance objective of skills policy allows industry domination of policy focus and of advisory processes to the exclusion of learners. The learners experiencing disadvantage are excluded generally and especially are excluded from high-level policy that focuses on people undertaking study that is above Certificate III. The VET FEE-HELP policy, for example, was not targeted at people wishing to undertake Certificate III or below. Nonetheless, learners experiencing disadvantage were enticed into courses which were unsuitable for them and were disproportionate victims of fraudulent activity of private providers. The implementation of policy is not respectful of learners experiencing disadvantage in that dehumanising strategies of social categorisation are inappropriately proposed in policy to determine funding allocation for services to learners. Privatisation dominates so that the private sector delivers for higher cost and less support in training in areas where learners experiencing disadvantage are over-represented, i.e. usually in the qualifications necessary to work in the service areas of health, aged care and disability. The data collection for the sector, the Total VET Activity, acknowledges that there is a vacuum of information about the private sector and about who are the learners

experiencing disadvantage and where they may be. The Australian Human Rights Commission is ignored in its effort to have VET properly acknowledged through education for learners about what their rights are and education for policy-makers about how to undertake effective public administration.

This is a study of VET as a matter of human rights in Australia. There are other countries where enquiry such as this would be redundant. Finland, for example, consistently records the highest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) score and researchers argue that, while taking account of Finnish “mandates, memberships and processes” (Kearns, 2004) it is not coincidental that respect for learners, for education and for equity are central to Finnish policy (Rubin et al., 2014). The key tenets of the theory of this study are respect for the learner and the government’s obligation to promote and protect human rights. It is a social justice study grounded in rigorous comparison of macro, meso and micro empirical evidence and comparison of interdisciplinary academic literature, legislation and policy documents. I laid foundations for consideration of equity defined by its true, but often misconstrued, meaning as a matter of human rights. I took a social justice perspective to transfer the research to public policy analysis, itself an emerging area of study separate from its home discipline of political science (di Francesco, 2015, p. 261), and public administration and organisational theory (Head & Crowley, 2015).

This is a significant time to be undertaking research into equity in VET. In VET, the Australian Government is being urged to undertake branch and root reform. This would include closing of opportunity for fraudulent activity in VET which very recently has targeted many of our most vulnerable people. In the Australian Human Rights Commission, there are recommendations for better government compliance under human rights obligations to inform VET learners of their rights and to ensure public administrators give effect to their obligations at law. In the United Nations, International Labour Organisation, OECD, EU and the World Bank, it is increasingly discussed and recognised that future prosperity lies in promoting equality, especially through VET. This means addressing productivity through a human rights framework.

## **7.2 Achievements of this Study**

The achievement of this study is the representation of equity as a matter of human rights law. Although national and international researchers may refer to a human rights imperative in education, few make the link to the human rights law that is involved. I have proposed a more respectful approach to defining learners experiencing disadvantage by bringing the educational concept of “learner disposition” into the policy arena. This study meets calls for increased

engagement by academic researchers with policy and with social justice research. The study takes steps to show how this might be done.

I highlight in this study that VET policy has a direct trickle-down effect to the people who are at the front line to implement it and the people who are the beneficiaries of it. Australian governance, public administration and policy analysis are interacting in negative ways with equity and are adversely affecting behaviour of government and RTO policy-makers, teachers and trainers and learners. The achievements of the study lie within the substantive and abstract theorising towards a formal theory. The substantive grounded theory is *problematic equity*, and the tentative formal theory is *alternative equity* comprising *neo-equity* and *embedded equity*.

An achievement of the study is to envision a new future for equity in VET. The study envisions in two ways. First, I propose a structure to increase understanding of equity in skills policy as it is (*neo-equity*) and to envision a structure of equity as it might be (*embedded equity*). *Embedded equity* proclaims equity that is situated within its own governance structure and tethered to its philosophical foundations as a matter of human rights. Second, *embedded equity* envisioned alternative methodology and methods to analyse VET governance, public administration and policy analysis that is an alternative to traditional quantitative research. I proposed a theoretical perspective to draw in the macro, meso and micro analysis necessary for social justice research (Charmaz, 2014; Clarke, 2005; Crotty, 1998; Miner, 2015). That is to say, policy-makers, teachers and trainers and especially learners experiencing disadvantage joined me in envisioning a different way of looking at equity in VET.

An achievement of this study is to bring methodological theory, diagrams and specifically designed figures (Figure 2.1; Figure 5.4) to promote understanding of the intellectual puzzle. The synthesis: human rights and responsibilities in the skills sector (Figure 2.1) integrates aspects of human rights that policy-makers should take into consideration in skills policy. The learner disposition (Figure 5.4) promotes understanding of the learner experiencing disadvantage. The learner disposition is represented in the diagram as: accommodating terror; loving to learn; being amazed; and waiting to see (Figure 5.4). This is a study which can be read through each of its figures and tables.

## 7.3 Contributions

The primary contribution of this study is the amplification of how equity might be approached differently in policy, as an intrinsic matter of human rights together with a respectful interpretation of learners in skills policy. Commensurate contributions are: the exemplification of bringing together



philosophy and praxis to consider skills policy and equity; demonstrating how policy analysis, and social justice analysis, may be undertaken through rigorous qualitative analysis, specifically conGT, in the public sector; contributing to understanding of the disabling differences between government policy analysts and academic researchers ; the meshing of equity and human rights as these relate to education policy; and overall the engagement with the era of “post-truth” as this relates to social justice research. I discuss each of these contributions below.

Governance of equity in VET should incorporate human rights defined as fairness and inclusion and optimise the principles and proposed practices of the Australian Human Rights Framework (Attorney-General’s Department, 2010) together with research and recommendations from the Australian Human Rights Commission (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009, 2012, 2014). The Australian Human Rights Commission has drawn government attention to the moral, political and legal imperatives of human rights in public administration generally and VET specifically (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009, 2012, 2014) but recommendations have not been implemented into skills policy by the Australian Government.

I merged philosophy and process as matters essential to social justice research (Charmaz, 2014; Guy & McCandless, 2012). In skills policy, the philosophy should accommodate human rights as a public value (Bryson et al., 2014; O’Flynn, 2007; Stoker, 2006) but will not have meaning unless how it is done is consistent with what is to be done (Rhodes & Wanna, 2007). From the empirical evidence, there emerged a lens for a human rights approach. This included learner disposition rather than the categorising of people based on gender, ethnicity, race and disability.

This study has shown a new way of undertaking qualitative research in policy analysis in the public sector. A contribution of the study is to exemplify how conGT can be used within skills policy and especially within social justice analysis. By focusing on traditions and dilemmas of learners experiencing disadvantage and by integrating individual learner experience with broad organisational realms, I exemplify how theorising can be undertaken in ways that are local, or Tasmanian, in “context” and are a local response to “contingent circumstances” in policy analysis (Turnbull, 2011, p. 255). These characteristics are intrinsic to social justice research.

If social justice means speaking truth to power and the power is government, it is essential to understand paradigms of public administration. I compared empirical evidence with literature to engage paradigms of public administration (Osborne, 2010; Rhodes, 2007; Stoker & Taylor-Gooby, 2013) of new public management (NPM) and new public governance (NPG). I addressed how the

nature of public administration paradigms impinges on equity outcomes and how to represent empirical material in social justice and policy research.

A contribution of this study is to mesh education and policy at a time when there is an international and national push in academic literature for increased research in education that is policy based (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011; OECD, 2012c). With reference to understanding learners experiencing disadvantage, this study engaged perspectives of educationalists and education researchers (Bourdieu, 2010; Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013; J. Field, 2012; Figgis et al., 2007; Lingard, 2013), interpretative political scientists (Bevir, 2011; Rhodes, 2011) and organisational theorists (Clarke, 2005; Miner, 2015). In broader terms, the study engaged with those who argued for recognition of theorisation of equity that is sociological as well as economic (Teese, Lamb, & Duru-Bellat, 2007, p. xx).

I respond to the academic push for more research (Abbott-Chapman & Easthope, 1998; Charmaz, 2014; Clarke, 2005; Denzin, 2014) to examine neo-liberal and managerialistic evidence gathering and analysis that affect people who are disadvantaged. How methodology is used to invoke issues of social justice is “absolutely pivotal” as a “push back” to “top-down managerial apparatus” (Denzin, 2014, 9.28). While academics increasingly discuss the importance of social justice research, much should be done to promote the topic as worthy of serious policy attention, and of funding (Denzin, 2014).

## **7.4 The Value of a Constructivist Grounded Theory Approach**

Constructivist grounded theory in this study is already referred to as a contribution to new ways of looking at policy analysis. As an approach to the intellectual puzzle, the value of conGT lay in its freshness for approaching longstanding and intractable problems. The value is in the systematic and rigorous approach with flexibility to draw people into the research and to value what they say and what they do in developing theory. ConGT opened up access to a constellation (Charmaz, 2014, p. 14) of researchers with consistent philosophical positions but with different perspectives and approaches to methods. ConGT delivered in three ways. First, conGT provided a framework for consistency in philosophy and praxis in the focus on a methodological/theory/methods package (Charmaz, 2014) (Chapter 4). The complementary symbolic interactionism and pragmatism (Charmaz, 2014) illuminated ways to investigate issues for individuals including those that would otherwise be silent or invisible (Star, 1995). Even more significantly, symbolic interactionism and pragmatism became the key to seeing social justice research in new ways (3.7).

Secondly, conGT gave me courage and a method for working across disciplines which is essential to social justice research (Charmaz, 2014, p. 338). This study is built on constant comparison and induction which gave new ways of looking at VET and social justice. Thirdly, and this is the way in which I most valued conGT, the availability of a variety of approaches aided considerably when analysis of data seemed to be stalled. I had the tools to add to theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism with situated interpretivism and my emerging insights into social justice research (Chapter 3). Further, I found it possible to balance the individual perspective within a broader meso and macro framework. Although frequently challenged by the study, I did not feel at a loss when seeking solutions to analytical problems.

## **7.5 Evaluating Constructivist Grounded Theory**

In this grounded theory study, I find it useful to evaluate by reference to original precepts of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and to investigate these with reference to the evolved theory of Strauss and Corbin (2014) and especially Charmaz (2014).

### **7.5.1 Credibility; Resonance; Usefulness, Interdisciplinarity, Advocacy**

I evaluate the theory of this study based on concepts of whether theory will *fit and work* which calls for theory that is credible, resonant and useful (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014). I add to this traditional grounded theory concept, the necessity of interdisciplinarity in social justice research (Charmaz, 2014) and the inevitability of advocacy (Strauss & Corbin, 2014).

The fit and work evaluation of Glaser and Strauss calls for three approaches: a theoretical framework that targets understanding for the reader; representation of the theory in ways where the reader can see and hear its people; and ways to help the reader understand how data emerged into theory. My theoretical framework explained the theory in Chapters 3 and 4 and sections of each chapter. Seeing and hearing the people calls for quotes of participants, short and long, and for describing background descriptions of interviews, together with one's own thoughts and responses to comments or situations. In Chapter 5 in particular, I quote in different ways and I integrate observations during interview, and memo'ed observations. How to promote understanding of how data emerged into theory was frequently challenging. I try to inform the reader of when and why I coded in certain ways and how this led to broader theory. A significant tool in this regard was to analyse separately at micro, meso and macro levels of inquiry and to show the comparisons of evidence from each.

Charmaz (2014) adds interdisciplinarity to evaluation tools to ensure that grounded theory is clearly positioned. I pursue an interdisciplinary substantive theory to ground my theory of equity in skills policy within government processes. I bookend the study with the context of the literature and later, the literature comparison. In addition, I labour to interpret, to analyse and to aesthetically depict through diagrams a study which is "... not merely a reporting of acts and factors ..." (Charmaz, 2014, p. 338) but which makes the theory visible in different ways.

To evaluate grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin (2014) include the lens of advocacy and "quality" (p. 341); they urge a focus on what the study may mean for policy. Strauss and Corbin make the important point that "In effect, when a theorist "grounds" or otherwise makes suggestions, he or she inevitably is entering an existing policy arena" (p. 361). That means that researchers must present themselves either as neutral parties or as "... avowed advocate of a particular theory-based position offering a fresh perspective on a policy issue" (p. 361). This position considerably freed up my preoccupation as to whether my theory was unduly influenced by my training in law and gave me guidance as to how to be reflexive about it. To counterbalance my advocacy position, I am reflexive about my work and knowledge (e.g. Foreword; Chapter 1; Chapter 3).

My evaluation of conGT is that it is a methodology that requires scholarship possibly at least equal to the empirical and theoretical analysis of the phenomenon under study. The development of the necessary theoretical sensitivity (Charmaz, 2014, p. 160) is something to contend with and may be a significant barrier in some circumstances. However, the methodology is path-breaking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Preissle, 2014) and does up-end traditional objectivist philosophical positions. My evaluation is that even for scholars not intending to use conGT, it is necessary to understand the implications of its history and evolution for broader qualitative research.

## **7.6 Limitations to this Study**

It felt a limitation at times to study the phenomenon from the perspective of a small island state. I occasionally wished for a broader range of participants, especially policy participants, and perspectives of the national and broader issues of equity. At the same time, the limitation converted to strength in allowing a comprehensive birds-eye view of the beliefs and practices, traditions and dilemmas of a diverse community of participants.

I was limited in the research by aspects of the National Statement of Ethical Principles (2013) which is protective of people experiencing disadvantage. I have extensive experience interviewing people with mental illness, including people who are offenders or prisoners. My experience is that the

National Statement of Ethical Principles is over-protective and that these people in need would be best served by respect for their capacity which is a matter of clinical diagnosis. There is so much that could be said about VET and the opportunities it could provide for people in mental health institutions.

Because of associated time and access restraints, except by coincidental recruitment, I did not interview people who were homeless, who were in prison, in a mental health institution or who were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. Nonetheless, I was given some confidence in this matter in two ways. First, there were learners who had only recently come into the system and they contributed their still-fresh perspectives of what it is like outside of the VET system specifically and the system generally. Second, it was often striking that people who were in skills courses really valued their opportunity and wished to speak up for those who are not included. While running the risk of admitting hearsay into the evidence, I believe participants' advocacy for potential fellow learners went a little way to circumscribing the limitation of not having access to all participants that I would wish to.

## **7.7 Further Research**

My proposals for further research relate to governance and institutions first and then to the learners and practitioners within them.

### **7.7.1 Governance: Human Rights**

If "equity" is to continue to be used in skills policy at the political level of the NPASR (Council of Australian Governments, 2012b), academic researchers and policy-makers must undertake more research to understand how best to integrate human rights within public policy (Chapter 6). The vacuum of political, government, policy and research knowledge and application in this area is potentially impeding people's participation and progress in skills development (Chapters 5 and 6).

It must be clearer in research that equity in skills policy cannot be fully analysed without reference to human rights and anti-discrimination law. One stark example of this is the failure of the system to protect learners, especially learners experiencing disadvantage (NCVER, 2015a), from the excessiveness of marketisation and especially the fraudulent activity of some providers with regard to the Australian Government's loan scheme (NCVER, 2015a). Further, the discussion paper for reform for VET FEE-HELP (Department of Education and Training, 2016c) shows absence of insight with regard to the calls of the Australian Human Rights Commission (2015a) for focus on VET and

public administration generally to engage the duty to promote and protect individual and social human rights (Figure 2.1).

### **7.7.2 Learners: Learner Disposition**

I drew on learner position as a policy position in skills policy that is demonstrably successful in other countries (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013) and which, by the end of this study, was being advocated in Australia (Beddie, 2015). I believe this study has established elements that learner disposition may comprise but also that there is methodology and methods in constructivist grounded theory to explore the concept. The concept as developed in this study can be located in broad organisational frameworks for purposes of policy analysis. I demonstrate this in the substantive grounded theory of *problematic equity* and the formal theory of *alternative equity* (Chapters 5 and 6). Especially in light of interest in academic research in ways of looking at learner disposition (Beddie, 2015) in policy analysis, I propose that Australia may benefit from further research into how learner disposition may inform equity objectives and how policy overseas links this with learner outcomes. Such research would be salient as ways are sought to address longstanding intractable problems of “learning and earning” (Eslake, 2016; M. Smith, 2015) among people experiencing disadvantage.

### **7.7.3 Practitioners: Conscientiousness and NPM**

Educational and policy practitioners showed ethical and emotional responses in interviews to issues of equity. Similarly to Figgis et al. (2007) and Angus et al. (2013), I had not anticipated the enthusiasm for the research topic and the expansiveness of participants. In this study, I do not explore possible linkages between personal ethics and emotions of practitioners to the possibly excessively “utilitarian” (Stoker, 2006, p. 42) paradigm of NPM and how this may affect formulation and implementation of skills policy. This study points to a strong need for further research into the lived experience of policy-makers dealing with equity and probably wicked problems generally. Notwithstanding this, government may find that useful information emerges by introducing a process through which practitioners, both private and public, together may openly communicate and discuss the ethics of equity.

## **7.8 Recommendations**

I set out below introductory comments together with recommendations arising from this research.

### **7.8.1 Competition Policy: Public Interest Test in VET**

Marketisation in the skills sector through competition policy has opened up access to education (Griffin, 2016). However, participation rates in VET have been undulating since 1994 and appear especially flat for 15- to 64-year-olds in the 2016 analysis (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016, p. 19).

Researchers suggest that excessive unregulated marketisation has also caused some disruptions to achievement of VET objectives (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016; Bowman & McKenna, 2016). I propose in Chapter 2 that recent revelations with regard to absence of insight in VET FEE-HELP and TVA collections especially have raised questions as to how human rights can be effectively upheld in the present marketised VET system. The Australian Government (2015) has proposed that competition policy in vocational education and training be subject to a public interest test. It may be that Tasmania has the opportunity through application of a public interest test to exercise more local influence over Australian policy.

### **7.8.2 Recommendation**

The relevant Tasmanian and Australian government departments together with the Australian Human Rights Commission investigate the opportunity raised by the public interest test for harmonising human rights with competition policy in VET with a view to minimising possible disruptions caused by marketisation and to improving learning outcomes for learners experiencing disadvantage.

## **7.9 Agenda 2017 – National Council for VET Education Research (NCVER) Research**

NCVER commissioned an evaluation to look back at the research agenda of 2010 to 2014 and to provide input into what might be the research agenda for the future. Beddie (2015), in consultation with a wide range of VET stakeholders, proposed that in the previous research agenda, there was insufficient attention paid to matters of governance in skills policy, including a lack of reference to learners experiencing disadvantage. However, while this new attention is paid to issues of governance, equity is not addressed as a matter of human rights.

### **7.9.1 Recommendation**

NCVER, in its role to be the Australian authority of high-quality independent information on vocational education and training (NCVER, 2014a) should take up with the Australian Human Rights

Commission the matter of whether and how the future NCVER research agenda should explore equity as a matter of human rights.

## **7.10 Equity Tasmania?**

Tasmania is a small island with a small population. This can be a research disadvantage but it can also be a distinct advantage in policy formulation and implementation. First, based on population size, it makes pragmatic sense for people outside the mainstream to be fitted into selected mainstream activity. Second, the small size and geographical convenience relative to other states and territories should mean it is possible for the sought-after networking within and between public and private providers to be coordinated and implemented to the advantage of learners experiencing disadvantage. The Australian Government's focus on competition policy and a marketised VET system would appear to militate against private and public sector networking. However, the theorising of this study reveals potential cooperative effort among the Tasmanian Government and RTO policy-makers and providers to address the needs of learners experiencing disadvantage as matter of equity and public value (Chapters 5 and 6). Third, there is only a small number of public administrators and therefore it should be possible to train these people in matters of human rights and VET and to develop policy that is compatible with equity. Finally, while I represent this study as provisional (Charmaz, 2014, p. 344), I believe that the empirical evidence so far strongly endorses that adult learners experiencing disadvantage in Tasmania *do like to learn* (5.4.2).

### **7.10.1 Recommendation**

Relevant representatives of the Tasmanian Government, Equal Opportunity Tasmania, Ombudsman Tasmania and representatives of the public and private providers of skills should together invite the Australian Human Rights Commission to meet to evaluate the human rights recommendations of the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), and to consider establishment of a body, or incorporation into an existing body, of a decision-making Equity Tasmania function to take steps to embed equity in skills policy in Tasmania.

## **7.11 Policy Analysis and Academic Researchers**

In this study, I refer to some insularity of public sector policy analysts (Head & Crowley, 2015; Head & Walter, 2015; Osborne, 2010) regarding research into the subject of equity and observed the absence of qualitative research in government policy. Head and Walter (2015) refer to this matter in these terms:



Traditionally, policy analysis by practitioners in Australia is a pragmatic process not founded in systematic methodology; there is a gap between the two communities of policy practitioners and academic policy researchers (p. 254).

This study signals policy benefits to government in investigating constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) for generating rigorous interpretivist evidence with regard to wicked problems (e.g. Briggs, 2007; Rittel & Webber, 1973).

### **7.11.1 Recommendation**

The Equity Tasmania function proposed above should direct the establishment of an office to implement processes for strong collaboration between skills policy-makers and practitioners and academic policy researchers.

## **7.12 Closing Remarks**

I address how I have responded to the intellectual puzzle of how to embed equity in VET and I set out the achievements, contributions and proposals for further research with attendant recommendations. This study must end with the affirmation that learners experiencing disadvantage like to learn and that they have the human right to be respected in their efforts to do so.

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# Appendices

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C. Learners: Consent

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## Appendix A: Learners, RTOs, Teachers and Trainers: Poster (Invitation)



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

PhD Study

Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

Val Kitchener, LLB, Cert Legal Prac

### AN INVITATION

to

Learners aged between 18 and 64 years,  
Teachers and Trainers in Equity Programs  
to Contribute to Research with Val Kitchener

Will you meet to discuss your experiences  
with education and training?

This will take about one hour of your time at a time and place where you feel comfortable.

If you are interested to help with this research please contact Val at  
[valk@iprimus.com.au](mailto:valk@iprimus.com.au) or phone 0434 331 910

Watch your noticeboard for dates when Val will be at your institution to personally answer your questions  
about the study.

Val will be available

(date)

(time)

(place)

## Appendix B: Learners: Information Sheet



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

PhD Study

Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

Val Kitchener, LLB, Cert Legal Prac

*Skills Policy and Equity –  
Valuing the voice of Tasmanian Adults*

*What are your experiences in education and training?*

*Val Kitchener would like to hear from  
Participants in Equity Programs who are aged between 18 and 64*

*Hello - My name is Val and I would very much like to talk with you.*

This is addressed to you because you are taking part in an equity or support program to help people to build their skills.

I want to ask students about their experiences in training and education and to discuss what they think equity and support programs should include so that they help students as much as possible in the future.

You do not have to provide any personal details. Everything shared will be kept confidential and private.  
If you have special needs in order to participate in this study, I will ensure they are met.

### What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to have information direct from people about matters that affect how they build their skills. This information is important to help find ways to make it easier for all Tasmanians to benefit from education.

**What will I be asked to do?**

Your participation is entirely voluntary and is completely confidential. The PhD when published will not identify you as a participant.

I would like to meet with you for about one hour. I will:

- Explain to you the details of the study;
- Invite you to talk about your experiences with study;
- If you agree, audio-record your comments;
- Tell you, and show you notes of, what has been written down and will change anything that you wish to be different.

***Some questions might include:***

What education have you undertaken in the past?

What has been your experience with education?

Do you like to study?

Are there obstacles at home or elsewhere which make it difficult for you to study?

What are the things that you think could be done to help you to study?

**Are there benefits for me in the study?**

There may be a benefit of participation in this study for you to give time to thinking about what you would like to do with your future. There may be benefits for future students who need some help to improve their skills.

There may be benefits for the community generally as it is well known that one of the best ways to have good policy is to make sure that all people have a chance to give their opinion.

**What are the risks for me in the study?**

Sometimes people can become upset if they are talking about their goals in life. Perhaps some thoughts of bad times will come to mind that will be upsetting.

If you become upset during the interview, then you do not have to continue or the topic can be changed.

You will have confidential access to counselling services if you feel that you need them. The details are attached to this information sheet.

**What if I change my mind during or after the study?**

You can decide not to be in the study at any time. You do not have to give anyone a reason for changing your mind.

However, the information you have already given may have to stay in the study if the date is after 30 January 2015.

All research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for five years from the publication of the study results, and will then be destroyed unless you have given permission for data to be archived.

### **How will the results of the study be published?**

I will publish a summary of the study in newsletters that are distributed to TasTAFE, to Registered Training Organisations and to the Not for Profit sector. You will have access to the findings of the study when the PhD is completed.

### **What if I have questions about this study?**

If you have any questions about this study please do contact me or ask your teacher or trainer for more information.

*My contacts are: valmaek@utas.edu.au or 0434 331 910.*

This study has been approved by the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or complaints about the conduct of this study, please contact the Executive Officer of the HREC (Tasmania) Network on (03) 6226 7479 or email [human.ethics@utas.edu.au](mailto:human.ethics@utas.edu.au). The Executive Officer is the person nominated to receive complaints from research participants. Please quote ethic reference number [Hxxxxx].

*Please keep this information sheet*

#### **Supervisors:**

Professor Sue Kilpatrick: Director, Centre for University Pathways and Partnerships, University of Tasmania

Dr Chrissie Berryman, General Manager, Skills Tasmania

Dr Susan Johns, Research Officer, Centre for University Pathways and Partnerships, University of Tasmania

#### **ATTACHED CONTACTS FOR:**

**SUPPORT SERVICES PROVIDED IN AGREEMENT WITH THIRD PARTIES; OR  
SUPPORT SERVICES ARRANGED BY VAL KITCHENER.**

#### **SERVICES TO INCLUDE:**

1. COUNSELLING
2. INTERPRETER
3. CULTURAL ADVICE
4. DISABILITY SERVICES

## Appendix C: Learners: Consent



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

### PhD Study

#### Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

Val Kitchener, LLB, Cert Legal Prac

### Consent Form

#### Research Participants: Learners aged between 18 and 64

#### Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

1. I agree to take part in the research study named above.
2. The Information Sheet has been discussed with me and I understand it.
3. The study has been explained to me and I understand what it is about.
4. I understand that the study involves one meeting of about one hour.
5. I understand that I can choose whether my information will be recorded in handwritten note form; or audio recorded; or documented onto a laptop computer.
6. I understand that:  
  
I do not have to be involved if I do not want to;  
  
I can decide to stop if I want to;  
  
If I become upset during the interview, then I do not have to continue or the topic will be changed;  
  
If I become upset after the interview, and it would help to talk to someone, I will have access to contact numbers of people for me to talk to;  
  
Val respects my rights and will answer any questions that I have at any time.
7. I understand that information will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for five years from the publication of the study results, and it will then be destroyed.
8. I understand that Val will keep everything confidential.
9. I understand that the results of the study will be published so that I cannot be identified as a participant.

**Participant's name:**

---

**Participant's signature:**

---

**Date:**

---

**Statement by Investigator**

☐

I have explained the project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

☐

The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided so participants have had the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this project.

**Investigator's name:**

---

**Investigator's signature:**

---

**Date:**

---

## Appendix D: RTOs: Invitation



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

PhD Study

Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

Val Kitchener, LLB, Cert Legal Prac

Dear...

**Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults**

***Invitation to Providers of Programs funded under the Equity Grant Programs***

***to Contribute to a Study of Learners who are Adult Tasmanians***

I am undertaking a study into equity for marginalised adult Tasmanians in vocational education as part of fulfilment of requirements for a PhD. A copy of the information sheet for the project, including details of my supervisors, is included.

The primary research question is: What are the features of good governance and policy in skills development that lead to positive outcomes for marginalised people?

You are invited to:

- assist with publicity and recruitment to the study of learners in your equity programs and teachers or trainers providing those programs;
- facilitate opportunities for me to visit your premises on 3 or 4 occasions in order to interview learners and teachers or trainers who are willing to take part in the study;
- be a stakeholder participant in the study. This would involve an interview of about one hour as well as a possible invitation to contribute to a focus group.

The Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Right Ethics Committee has approved the study.

This is an important opportunity to document the knowledge that you, teachers and trainers, and learners in equity programs have about how we can develop vocational education policy that is as effective as possible.

I am very conscious that you have many demands in your timetable. I would not expect to take too much of your time. I will be amenable to your preferred ways of advancing any arrangements. I will be seeking your advice with regard to: oral explanation of the research based on written information provided; oversight to ensure that participants feel safe and emotionally comfortable with all arrangements; general advice with regard to the best ways of engaging participants.

Within the next week, I shall ring you to follow up this letter and to arrange an appointment at your convenience if you are happy to contribute.

Yours sincerely,

**Val Kitchener**

**PhD Researcher**



## Appendix E: RTOs, Teachers and Trainers, Policy-Makers: Information Sheet



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

### PhD Study

Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

Val Kitchener, LLB, Cert Legal Prac

*Skills Policy and Equity –*

*Valuing the voice of Tasmanian Adults*

*What are your Experiences in Education and Training?*

This invitation is to you as a provider of programs funded by the Equity Grants Program or a policy-maker involved in vocational education and equity.

All who wish to be interviewed for this study do not have to provide any personal details.

Everything shared will be confidential and private.

### What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to have information direct from learners and stakeholders involved in equity for learners in vocational education programs. This information is important because it may lead to improved policy to make it easier for all Tasmanians to benefit from education.

### What will I be asked to do?

Your participation is entirely voluntary and is completely confidential. The PhD when published will not identify information that you provide.

I would like to meet with you for about one hour at a place that is comfortable for you. I wish to flag also that you may also be invited to contribute additional time of about one hour to a small focus group.

I will:

- Explain to you the details of the study;
- Invite you to take part in a semi-structured interview;
- If you agree, audio record your comments;
- Tell you, and show you notes of, what has been written down; and
- change anything that you wish to be different.

### **What are the benefits of the study?**

Future students may enjoy benefits of improved equity programs.

Government and community may enjoy benefit arising from informed policy for equity programs in vocational education.

### **What if I change my mind during or after the study?**

You can decide not to be in the study at any time. You do not have to give anyone a reason for changing your mind.

However, the information you have already given may have to stay in the study if the date is after 30 January 2015.

All research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for five years from the publication of the study results, and will then be destroyed.

### **How will the results of the study be published?**

I will publish a summary of the study in newsletters that are distributed to TasTAFE, to Registered Training Organisations and to the Not for Profit sector to which you will have free access.

You will have access to the findings of the study when the PhD is completed.

### **What if I have questions about this study?**

*Please contact me at:* valmaek@utas.edu.au; or 0434 331 910.

This study has been approved by the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or complaints about the conduct of this study, please contact the Executive Officer of the HREC (Tasmania) Network on (03) 6226 7479 or email [human.ethics@utas.edu.au](mailto:human.ethics@utas.edu.au). The Executive Officer is the person nominated to receive complaints from research participants. Please quote ethic reference number [Hxxxxx].

*Please keep this information sheet*

***Supervisors:***

Professor Sue Kilpatrick: Director, Centre for University Pathways and Partnerships, University of Tasmania

Dr Chrissie Berryman, General Manager, Skills Tasmania

Dr Susan Johns, Research Officer, Centre for University Pathways and Partnerships, University of Tasmania

**ATTACH CONTACTS FOR:**

SUPPORT SERVICES PROVIDED IN AGREEMENT WITH THIRD PARTIES; OR  
SUPPORT SERVICES ARRANGED BY VAL KITCHENER.

**SERVICES TO INCLUDE:**

5. COUNSELLING
6. INTERPRETER
7. CULTURAL ADVICE
8. DISABILITY SERVICES

## Appendix F: RTOs, Teachers and Trainers: Consent



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

PhD Study

Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

Val Kitchener, LLB, Cert Legal Prac

### Consent Form

Research Participants: Teachers or Trainers; Stakeholders

Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

1. I agree to take part in the research study named above.
2. I have read and understood the Information Sheet for this study.
3. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
4. I understand that the study involves 1 meeting of about 1 hour.  
I understand that I can choose whether my information will be recorded in handwritten note form; or audio recorded; or documented onto a laptop computer.
5. If I have agreed to the option of a focus group interview, I undertake to respect and maintain the confidentiality of information provided by other group members during the interview.
6. I consent to focus group (i) being audio-recorded or (ii) being documented with handwritten notes or (iii) being documented onto a laptop computer, or a combination of these according to the preference of the researcher.
7. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.  
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without any effect.
8. If I so wish, I may request that any data I have supplied be withdrawn from the research, until 30 January 2015.
9. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premise for five years from the publication of the study results, and will then be destroyed.
10. I understand that the researcher will maintain confidentiality and that any information I supply to the researcher(s) will be used only for the purposes of the research.

11. If I become upset after the interview, and it would help to talk to someone, I will have access to contact numbers of people for me to talk to.
12. I understand that the results of the study will be published so that I cannot be identified as a participant.

**Participant's name:**

---

**Participant's signature:**

---

**Date:**

---

**Statement by Investigator**

☐

I have explained the project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

☐

The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided so participants have had the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this project.

**Investigator's name:**

---

**Investigator's signature:**

---

**Date:**

---

## Appendix G: RTOs: Confirmation



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

### PhD Study

**Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults**

**Val Kitchener, LLB, Cert Legal Prac**

Dear

Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

Thank you for your response to my letter of (date). I am pleased that you are willing act as

(a Third Party) (a Third Party and participant in) this study. Your assistance and contribution to the study will be invaluable.

I will contact you in the next week to follow up this letter and to organise a meeting that should take no more than half an hour of your time.

I am required to comply with the requirements of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) values. Before interviewing, I will be seeking to know from you how or whether I might integrate with your existing NVR Standards or protocols to ensure respect for interviewees. For example, do you have an arrangement with a counsellor, or an interpreter if either is needed? I would like to talk with you about whether I might have access to these services for the benefit of students or whether we can make some other arrangement that is satisfactory for all parties.

I do appreciate your response to my invitation and I look forward, very much, to meeting with you and to having the benefit of your advice.

When we meet, I shall be most happy to provide any further information that you need. Thank you again.

Yours sincerely

Val Kitchener

PhD Researcher

(Date)

## Appendix H: RTO Community: Invitation



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

### PhD Study

#### Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

Val Kitchener, LLB, Cert Legal Prac

Letter/email to

Stakeholders: program providers; not for profit peak bodies; any agency interested in skills policy and equity not included in Third Parties and Policy Makers.

Dear

Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

I am undertaking a PhD study on the above topic and would be very glad to have your input.

My primary research question is: What are the features of good governance and policy in skills development that lead to positive outcomes for marginalised people?

An information sheet about the project is attached. You will see that this study is supported by Skills Tasmania.

I am writing to your organisation as one which has objectives and strategies commensurate with the development of skills policy and especially with regard to people who are marginalised in the economy and society.

Within the next week, I shall ring you to follow up this letter and to arrange an appointment at your convenience if you are happy to contribute. I would not expect to take too much of your time.

I wish to flag with you also that there may be a later invitation to you to contribute additional time to a small focus group.

Yours sincerely

Val Kitchener

PhD Researcher

(date)

## Appendix I: Government: Invitation



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

**PhD Study: Skills Policy and Equity**

**Val Kitchener, LLB, Cert Legal Prac**

Letter/email to heads of agency:

Policy makers in Commonwealth and State Government

Dear

Skills Policy and Equity – Valuing the Voice of Tasmanian Adults

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to have your contribution to my PhD study. The study's primary research question is:

What are the features of good governance and policy in skills development that lead to positive outcomes for marginalised people?

My focus is on adult Tasmanians who are taking part in equity programs of private and public registered training organisations. The study includes interviews with learners, stakeholders and policy makers.

The research is innovative and of potential benefit to individuals and to Tasmania. I am addressing research and policy gaps identified in an extensive literature review. I aim to more effectively define 'marginalisation' as this relates to Tasmanian adult learners in skills policy. I will suggest ways to incorporate the definition into governance of equity in skills policy.

I would like to meet with you to invite your comment on up to six matters that I have extracted from interviews with part of my study population. (Those matters will be provided in advance of the meeting.)

More detail about the study is contained in the attached information sheet.

I wish to flag with you also that there may be a later invitation to you to contribute to a small focus group.



You have valuable experience and insights into the area that I am studying. I do hope that I may have the benefit of discussion with you.

I shall contact your office over the next week to arrange an appointment if you are happy to meet with me.

Yours sincerely

Val Kitchener

PhD Researcher

Attachment: (Attachment 5)

## Appendix J: Interview Guide



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

### INTERVIEWS

#### Matters indicative of the Information to be collected

##### Learners

The information to be collected from learners goes to:

- the personal or life circumstances that affect opportunity to study (e.g. .Is the learner a primary carer of children?)
- the structural issues that may constrain the learner e.g. cost of public transport;
- the learning disposition which will revolve around 'learners' identities as they themselves see them especially their 'learning' identity; how they see and interact with the place of learning; how the personal and the social issues come together to affect how they learn' (J. Field, 2012, p. 8).

The learners are people who are marginalised. The experience of the researcher is that information from people in these circumstances is best collected if the flow of the interview is 'led from behind'. The researcher as far as possible will aim to 'obtain cooperation and build rapport, yet remain neutral and objective' (Neuman, 2003, p. 292). To this end, the researcher will not pose direct questions but prompt elaboration from the participant on statements made. A framework that the researcher is seeking information about is set out below. Questions would not necessarily be direct nor in the order set out.

##### Introduction and Questions

My study is mainly about finding ways for people to learn more skills. As part of the study, I would like to understand from you what is called your 'disposition to learning'. By that, I mean that I would like to discuss how you feel about learning. I would like to know if you like to learn and if you don't, why might that be. It will help if you can tell me also what kind of obstacles stops you from learning. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions.

1. Can you tell me a little about your life? Did your parents and other family learn skills?
2. At what age did you finish formal schooling?
3. What age group are you?
  - 18 – 30
  - 31 – 40
  - 41 – 50
  - 51 – 60
  - 61 – 65
  - Over 65
4. Why are you taking part in this course?
  - Qualifications for work
  - To help me to do qualifications for work
  - To help me to do other things that may not be for work
5. Will you describe for me the format and design of your course?
6. What do you like/not like about the format and design of your course?
7. Is this your first course of this kind?
8. What other courses of this kind have you done?
9. Have you undertaken any other kind of learning, and what might that be?
10. What would make it easier for you to do more courses in the future?
  - Help with personal circumstances
  - Help with funds, transport
  - Help with building confidence
  - Other
11. What would have made it easier for you to do more courses in the past?
12. The matters we have discussed help me to understand better your disposition to learning. Are there questions you would like to ask me about this study?
13. Shall we look again at the matters we have discussed and is there information you would add so that I can understand better your disposition to learning?

## **Teachers and Trainers**

### **Introduction and Questions**

I have provided the information sheet about my study. I wish to talk with you about ways that we might better define 'marginalisation' in skills development policy and about the governance of equity. I would like to have your views on matters of disposition of learners and whether and how disposition might be reflected in skills development so that we have improved equity for learners.

1. Will you tell me your experience in working in equity programs in skills development?
2. Do you think that there are ways to help more learners acquire more skills?
3. What are your opinions about learner disposition?
4. What are your opinions about governance of equity in skills development?

### **All Stakeholders (Providers, NFP, Policy-makers)**

The information to be collected from teachers and trainers, all other stakeholders will be:

- responses to findings from learner interviews from the perspective of governance of equity within skills development;
- with regard to skills policy, a description of existing governance structures in equity that affect the matters that learners have raised;
- with regard to skills policy, a description of what should be governance structures in equity which might lead to improved outcomes in light of the information collected from learners.

### **Introduction and Questions**

I have provided the information sheet about my PhD research topic. My main focus in discussion with you is about governance of equity. This is a summary of my findings to date from learners, and from teachers and trainings.

1. How would you describe your management level:
  - Senior
  - Middle
  - Junior
2. Is there an equity policy related to skills development objectives that you work with?
3. Is there a governance framework for equity in skills development as you understand it?
4. Is there a focus on equity for marginalised learners in your policy area?

Strategic Design Plans for interviews are below (pp 55, 56, 57).

## Appendix K: Examples of Analysis

Table 4.3(a): Samples of coding interviews: initial

<b>Learner Coding</b>  Loving to learn Regretting the past Being the welfare people Being a welfare child Planning next steps Loving to learn Being amazed Hoping for next generation Worrying about future Waiting to see	<b>Abstract from Interview: Naomi</b>  I love to learn. I am no good ... I never was good at school. My Mum and Dad was violent ... always fighting ... you have to understand, Val, we (waving hand to indicate other learners) are the welfare people. I was always welfare. I was a welfare child. What they done to us ... (long pause)... you don't know ... you wouldn't believe me ... (I re-read transcript and Naomi took up the interview) X (teacher) made a plan with me I just love it. I just love all the things to learn. It is amazing. I did not think there was so much to learn. My kids think I am mad ... but they think it is good. (I re-read the transcript and Naomi took up the interview.) Yeah, X (son) won't do (VET) ... my daughters are thinking about coming to learn computers ... to do facebook ... they want to know it because their kids are doing it ... I don't know if they will let me keep doing things (at VET) ... (laughter; nervous). I want to but I don't know how long they will let me come ... (becoming tearful; taking control; cheering up) I love talking to people like you ...
<b>Policy-maker Government Coding</b>  Endorsing research Endorsing transcription  We don't know how to talk about equity Asking <i>why</i> we have a problem Spending money to no avail Isolating people has social and economic effect Loving to learn Identifying lack of self-confidence Worrying about equity in policy	<b>Pat Extract from interview</b>  If it works for you I don't have a problem if you type as we go. Probably a good idea. I scribbled down my ideas. I would like a copy of what you do if that is okay. I want to think about this some more. What you are doing is very important. Equity in VET – in everything – is a big, big problem. I don't think we have much idea what we are doing. ... I have never felt comfortable with how we describe equity ... so I am trying to look around and to ask: what are we really doing? What does VET equity really mean? I don't think we have a real meaning for it ... we don't know how to talk about equity ... Tasmania has productivity problems and education is central ... but I don't think we understand why things aren't improving ... we spend a lot of money on education ... Tasmanians are often from the country and are isolated ... Tasmania can be isolated .... Its social as well as economic. But I think everybody loves to learn if they have a fair go ... or the right go. In Tasmania, lack of self-confidence is a big issue ... this is part of our social fabric, I think. We have no idea of how to define equity.

<p><b>Coding</b></p> <p><b>Registered training organisation (RTO):</b></p> <p><b>Policy-maker</b></p> <p>Endorsing research</p> <p>Showing irritation about whether people love to learn</p> <p>Loving to teach</p> <p>Rejecting (fiercely, emotionally) “normalising” learners</p> <p>Identifying terror</p> <p>Lamenting missed equity groups</p> <p>Rejecting jobs focus</p>	<p><b>Toni</b></p> <p><b>Extract from interview</b></p> <p>It’s a good idea to type the interview. I would like a copy later ... Yes, I will let you know if I want to add anything else.</p> <p>...</p> <p>Our equity students want jobs; they want to socialise – go to the pictures with friends; they are like everybody else but we don’t talk about that ...</p> <p>Of course, they like to learn. They are unorganised and a bit all over the place but they absolutely love to learn.</p> <p>I have been in this game for years and I am still moved by how much we can make a difference – given a chance.</p> <p>All of us talk all the time about government policy and making us put students “in a box”. Sometimes it breaks my heart to be making them be like everybody else.</p> <p>The ones that come here are so terrified. But they are the ones who come all the same.</p> <p>There are an awful lot of people out there who are too terrified to come here. And we may not be able to do everything but I think I can say I can’t think of anyone who hasn’t benefitted from coming to VET.</p> <p>But we can’t be about jobs all the time.</p> <p>We have to ... deal with how to get out of bed; how to present socially and for work.</p> <p>We do a lot off the side of the desk because there isn’t funding for the real equity outcomes that we believe are important.</p>
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**Table 4.3(b): Samples of coding interviews: focused**

**LEARNERS**

SAYING	DOING
Choosing not to burden family Experiencing ‘crap’ early years	Defining self differently by ‘helping career’
Rejecting teacher’s faith in ability	Pursuing part-time job with computers  Pursuing childcare career, hotel receptionist, retail etc.
Living in a cul de sac of women  Learning to fit in  Loving to learn all sorts of things  Expressing excitement and amazement at learning	Aspiring although doubting ability  Embracing education as building new identity

**TEACHERS, TRAINERS**

SAYING	DOING
Loving to train  Rejecting fiercely low expectations (of learners) – and teaching to high expectations	Recording very good attendance  Teaching/training to learner disposition

**POLICY-MAKERS**

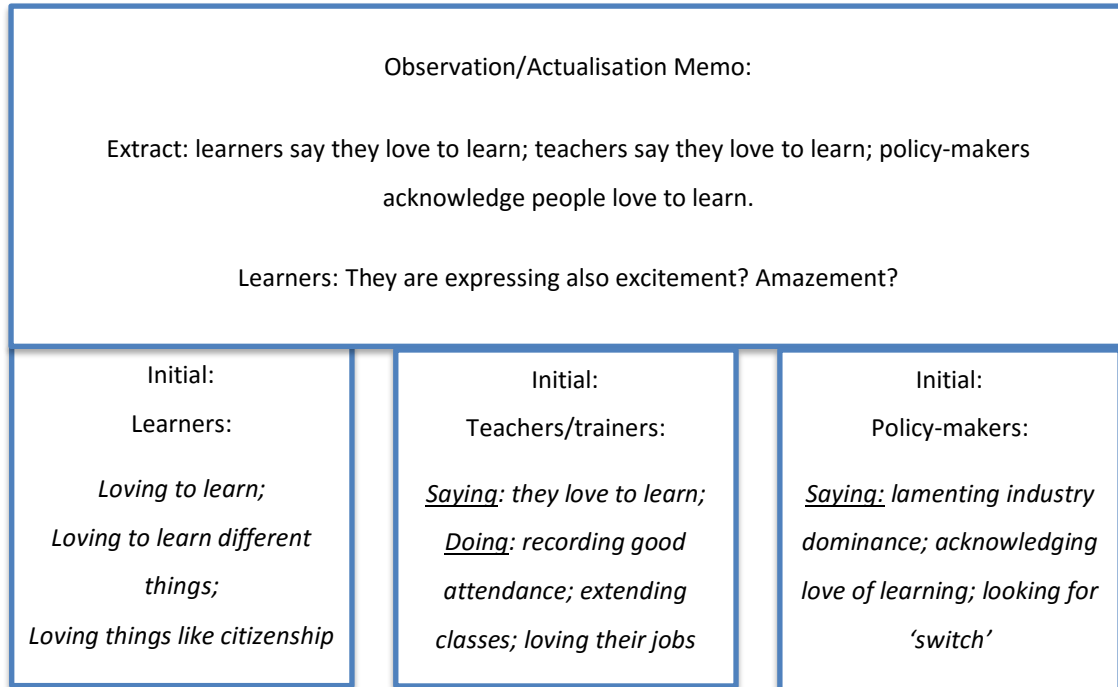
SAYING
Casting about for definition of equity  Rejecting low expectations (for learners)  Rejecting productivity as primary objective  Rejecting industry dominance  Railing against inability to make change

**Table 4.3(c): Samples of coding observations**

<b>Coding</b>	<b>Abstract from memo:</b>
Researcher	Remember: concerns, justifications and reflections
Observations	Only four interviews thus far. What's the problem?
Doubting coding	Am I finding responses counter intuitive? I thought I would have instant contesting of ideas about learning and about equity. But learners, teachers, policy-makers are reflecting same/similar, concerns; their justifications and reflections about issues all coalesce. Ahhh: the macro, meso and micro seem to saying the same things. <i>This is why comparison is so important within and across codes!</i>
Twigging to comparison	
Self-knowledge	What about me? I thought I didn't adhere to the low expectations of learners, but it seems I am influenced despite myself.
Doubting "terror"	Learners and teachers and trainers <i>all</i> keep using the "terror" word? Government policy-makers seem to have a handle on this; but do they put themselves at more distance i.e. they speak of "self-confidence" not "terror. What did I expect? Ah, I expected them to afford "blame", each group to think the other group has a problem.
Euphemising "terror"	
Emerging recognition of pervasiveness of policy in classroom	But they all agree the problem is lack of understanding about learners together with lack of good policy.
Epiphanising!	The macro, meso and micro merge! It is the coding, not the participants, who are macro, meso and micro. Everybody has something to contribute to policy; everybody has something to contribute to learner disposition.



**CATEGORY: Loving to learn; being amazed**



**Figure 4.4: Interviews and observations: Initial to Focused Coding to Categories**

Val Kitchener, LLB, Cert Legal Prac

Skills policy and equity

## Theoretical Testing

### Matters for reflection

#### *Policy-makers (Government)*

Not knowing how to talk about equity

Rejecting productivity as dominant goal for training

Regretting ...

#### *Policy-makers (RTO)*

Recording good attendances

Loving to learn

Subverting government policy

#### *Learners*

Attending classes

Planning for the future

## Appendix L: Actualising Memo

### Rhodes and Charmaz

First, I point out that Rhodes and Charmaz are both qualitative, interpretivist researchers. Rhodes (2011) declares his methodology as interpretivist which he refers to often as “story-telling”. Charmaz (2014) is a grounded theorist and she declares also that her portrayal of the studied world is interpretive and “not an exact picture of it” (p. 17). While the study is focused on Rhodes (1997, 2007) and Charmaz (2014), it is recognised that there are influential connections with Bevir (e.g. 2003) in the case of Rhodes, and with Glaser and with Strauss (1967) in the case of Charmaz. It is noteworthy that Bevir has a Cambridge School background noted for unique depth and rigour in historical approach and interpretivism (Turnbull, 2011, p. 253) while Charmaz and her Chicago School antecedents are steeped in pragmatist philosophy and life history analysis (Charmaz, 2014, p. 341),

Charmaz and Rhodes share a common intellectual era and both write of how they were philosophically influenced by their times although Rhodes is a British political scientist and Charmaz is an American sociologist. Each author shares an ontological position in which reality is “multiple, processual, constructed” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13); Rhodes and Charmaz both report their emerging worldviews in the 1970s and 1980s that took them to a view of reality as multiple and problematic, not relative or positivist. In epistemology, Rhodes and Charmaz share ideas and language that are highly compatible. Rhodes (2011) emphasises that what he writes is his construction; Charmaz (2014) writes of reality that is constructed by us whether we recognise this. Each author emphasises the centrality of comparison as a methodological tool to ensure validity (Rhodes, 2011; Charmaz, 2014, p. 342).

The theoretical perspectives of Rhodes and Charmaz concerning structure and agency have different origins but reflect common intellectual positions. For Rhodes (2011), traditions and dilemmas are the frameworks for examining personal agency; he argues that traditions and dilemmas influence but do not determine people’s actions and reflection is an important part of the process. Charmaz (2014) addresses structure and agency through symbolic interactionism which is founded in pragmatism. She argues that agency is not imposed, that individuals are reflective and social life is processual.

With consistency of worldviews and theoretical perspectives, it follows that approaches and methods may follow a similar pattern. Rhodes “tells stories”; Charmaz interprets. Each relies on constant comparison as a means of inducting empirical material. Seeking ways of comparing, each takes a broad view of what will comprise data. Rhodes (2011) writes that: “What works is best”

(p. 13) and the test is meaning for users. Charmaz (2014) uses the same words as Rhodes to propose that the aim is to induct data that will “fit and work” (p. 3). She draws on Glaser and Strauss (1967), to take the position that “all is data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 3). It follows that the constant comparative process will look at the literature in ways that are different to traditional positivist method.

For Rhodes and Charmaz, the literature and people are key to evidence, especially as source for comparison. For Rhodes, the literature review engages the judgement of the academic community on the research in question. The literature review comes after analysis and theorising. For Charmaz, the literature is an ideological site to claim, locate and evaluate theory. In the constructions of Rhodes and of Charmaz, where interpretation of reality is elusive, the manner of interviewing is integral to the objective of driving abstract theory. Rhodes (2011) seeks to “provide thick descriptions” (p. 8); Charmaz (2014) uses the language of the “intensive interview” to drill deep into the “person’s concerns at the moment, justifications of past actions, and measured reflections” (p. 85). The common message of Rhodes and Charmaz is that induction of participants’ stories will drive the validity of the account of “what is happening here” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 87). Each push constant comparison and emphasises the importance of iteration in data analysis and theorising, and theoretical sampling. To Charmaz (2014), theoretical sampling is vital to saturate theory. Rhodes theorises similarly and calls this his “yo-yo” practice.